One Piece of Sexism: Chinese Womanhood Through the Lens of *Shonen Manga*

Emily Canaday

SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the College Scholars Honors Program
North Central College

May 14, 2015

Approved: ___________________ Date: __________

*Thesis Director Signature*

Dr. Joanne Quimby

Approved: ___________________ Date: __________

*Second Reader Signature*

Dr. Luke Franks
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This thesis would never have come together without the counseling of many different people over the two years I spent researching and compiling what would become this final product. I say “counseling” because that is the majority of what those who were integral to this process did: the faculty members who read drafts and corrected me in consoling tones; the friends who, when the project overwhelmed me, talked me past my anxieties until I could return to work again; and the shoulders I cried on for various personal reasons. I may have written this thesis myself, but they gave me the strength I needed to keep the finish line in sight.

Quimby-Sensei: You are a force of nature. You had so much work to do and so many other students depending on you for graded tests, consultations, and advice; you had departmental duties and faculty concerns, and I was forever forgetting something or other, and yet you still found time to talk me through the worst moments of this process. I will always remember working on my poster with you, and how much we laughed that day. You have no idea how much I needed a friend in an authority figure that day. I could always be honest with you, and even though I was still figuring the world out and making a mess of things, you were always supportive. Thank you for making me feel that I actually had something to contribute to the world. Thank you so much for being accessible, whether it meant text messages or a hug on a hard day. You are precisely the kind of professor students come to a small college to know. It was a blessing to have you by my side for this. ありがとうございました。

Professor Franks: You couldn't know the full background of everyone on the China/Japan trip, but suffice it to say, I came on the trip with more baggage than the average sophomore still trying to find themselves. I just want you to know that it meant so much to me that you were there when I got sick in
China. I'll never forget laughing with you and Bai-Laoshi about that dreadful guy singing “Moves Like Jaeger” on China's Got Talent... I've grown up a lot since that trip, and understand now that I've been fortunate to have you as a professor and an adviser on this daunting– but enlightening– project.

I wish I'd taken more of your classes. ありがとうございました。

Mom: It wasn't easy, to be sure, but you got me, in one piece, to a place where I could finally spread my wings. Thank you for loving me even when I didn't love myself, and everything you gave.

Thank you for roadtrips and braids and our escape. I love you, Nice Laydee.

Dad: Thank you for being the one who helped me discover worlds outside of myself. Thank you for endless games of Make Believe when I was little, and for opening doors for me even as I've grown up.

As wide as the world is for me now, I'll always find a way back to visit my dad. I love you tons.

Patrick: Thank you for not letting Chicago-style eat me alive that day.

Joshua: Thank you for teaching me to chill out, let my hair down, and just dance.
ABSTRACT

As a popularizing medium in an era of globalization, manga is now available to a world-wide audience- and best beloved of all are shonen action series, traditionally aimed at a male audiences and generally plagued by casual sexism and patriarchal bent. Abroad, I saw the popularity of manga among China's youth and wondered how the gender perceptions in shonen series resonated with their changing society's view of women. In general, I found that historic patriarchalism made the experiences of Chinese women of old nearly as difficult as those suffered by objectified female characters in One Piece, and even amid tides of Westernization and economic opportunity, modern Chinese women still face unique challenges to society adequately perceiving their human worth. The collusion of Eastern and Western culture has both benefited Chinese perceptions of women and created new, gendered issues, which I analyze within character studies of One Piece's main female characters.
INTRODUCTION

As an increasingly-popular medium in an era of globalization, Japanese manga is now available to a world-wide audience in dozens of languages and via the internet. On a surface level, it's not difficult to understand why manga and its animated counterpart, anime, have taken off globally: as art combined with literature, stories and characters come alive; even black-and-white scenes printed on the cheap paper of weekly serials can contain truly beautiful and painstakingly skillful art; its eye-catching style is unique and instantly recognizable; and its stories, not limited by a cultural standard which says that “cartoons are only for kids,” can encompass many genres and specialize in themes which appeal to many demographic groups. Around the world, the best beloved of all manga are shonen action series, popular titles of which include the supernatural-swordsman drama Bleach, the ninja epic of Naruto, and the zany, pirate-themed One Piece.¹ Combining stylized, expressive art with a variety of characters, shonen manga has defied its origins as a genre primarily targeted at teen males and become the choice of international readers from many demographics. Indeed, with the ability to reach many demographics and its worldwide distribution, manga could likely be considered one of the most prolific of modern media forms, which would allow for great proliferation of whatever ideas or knowledge producers might seek for it to carry. But even as it ranges far beyond its birthplace, manga is a primarily Japanese-produced art form, which makes it a vehicle for intrinsic Japanese cultural and social values embedded within stories, themes, and situations. For spreading cultural awareness, this is excellent.

One of the most troublesome aspects of manga's ability to transfer cultural ideas, however, centers around the objectification of women. Traditionally aimed at a male audience, shonen manga are

generally plagued by casual sexism and a certain patriarchal bent in terms of the manufacturing of situations in which women's bodies are exposed or used as 'fanservice' material to increase readership. While the most pornographic of seinen\(^2\) series may be wrapped in plastic to discourage convenience-store shoppers from leering, soft-core pornography and sexual situations are readily available in shonen series, sometimes coming straight out of left field or through situations that are heavily contrived or which constitute tropes in ecchi\(^3\) manga. Sometimes art standards for female characters, which generally include large eyes and petite bodies with well-developed breasts\(^4\), can blur the line of age for characters who are being objectified, creating moral concerns (generally outside of Japan) over whether what is being viewed is the sexualization of children\(^5\). As manga spreads in global popularity, cultural conflict over the sexual mores of manga is inevitable— and so are is the transfer of ideas about sexuality and women's status to new generation.

While studying abroad, I saw the popularity of manga among Chinese youth and its utilization in commercial ventures (usually as mascots), and wondered how the gender perceptions in shonen manga series resonated with their changing society's view of women. In examining this question, I chose to confront the issue of how well female shonen characters reflected the experiences of Chinese women in the modern era, and whether their stylized actions resonated with social perceptions of how Chinese society claims women act (or should act). Combining the patriarchal dissemination theory of Riene Eisler, feminist economics, the humanistic interpretations of Chinese experience promoted by journalist Xinran, and observations of China's past and present provided respectively by reporter Lily Harper-Hinton and others, my thesis emerged in three specialized segments:

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\(^2\)Comics whose content is more mature or drama-based, aimed at adult audience. They are not always 'adult comics,' but may contain sexual or graphic content as per plot.

\(^3\)Ecchi manga combines soft-core pornography and extremely adult situations, and constitutes both a genre and an adjective. Usually key body parts like nipples and penises are 'whited out'. Tropes used in ecchi include using settings where girls wear skimpy to no clothing, such as onsen, beaches and pools, or where gym uniforms can be utilized.


In the first section, “The Root of All Evil,” focuses on why sexist representations resonate with Chinese culture. I sought to answer the question “Where did Chinese patriarchy emerge from?” My primary finding was that that historic patriarchalism, with roots in the Neolithic era, morphed early in Chinese history into a cultural value that has played a huge role in assuring the continued presence of oppression and skewed gender-value calculations within modern society. I argue that early in Chinese history, women's value was generated from their economic contribution to the household. Movement away from agrarian society structure and the incursion of roles delineated by Confucianism and Daoism solidified a disdain for female life in the minds of patriarchs. This shift created a persistent male bias challenged only nominally during the Cultural Revolution's failed attempts at modernization. But changing social perceptions of female value is not a mere question of departure from Chinese culture: amid tides of Westernization and economic opportunity, modern Chinese women still face unique challenges in being perceived as deserving of equal rights, which are often exacerbated by the classist and gain-based cultural influence of capitalism working to quash the collectivism and support networks that do exist within traditional Chinese social culture.

In the second section, “Pirates and Patriarchy,” the kinds of representations of women that the series *One Piece* puts forth is examined. Having selected the series *One Piece* as a general representative of themes and character depiction in *shonen manga*, I then chose three female characters from the series and examined their character arcs for instances of sexism, incongruent tropes, and 'fanservice'. I searched this popular shonen series for instances of familiarity between the experiences of Chinese women and those of the series' leading ladies, in an attempt to understand why these often-horrendous depictions might resonate with Chinese readers' expectations for female characters. I found no dearth of sexist material, and set to examining whether the attitudes conveyed in these instances were in sync with modern Chinese perceptions of female capability and gender-utility. In Nami's descent into vapid sexualization, I saw parallels to the experience of trafficked women and
migrant workers, who often leave home in search of a better life and find themselves relegated to vulnerable and powerless conditions; in Robin, I saw a struggle to be understood by those who do not or cannot understand others' limitations, which reflects modern women's experiences with an antiquated-but-evolving understanding of mental illness and the encroachment of Western beauty standards on a non-white population; finally, in Boa Hancock, one can see the sum of social beliefs about a woman's capability (or lack thereof) in positions of leadership, and the implicit guilt victims of sexual assault are made to feel, despite having been forced.

Whether these representations of modern gender-issues were deliberate or their presence affects female Chinese readership, I cannot say— but through our initial examination of Chinese gender-oppression, we can understand that certain themes of patriarchy are not being newly introduced to China through manga, but are also not being rejected by the wider readership because they remain, on some level, a reflection of how the female experience of hardship is viewed as so mundane and invisible that it has come to be expected in literature.

In the third segment, “The Now and Future (Communo-capitalist) Kingdom,” the national and cultural conditions in which these sexist representations are being received is examined in depth. To do so, I offer my observations on modern national policy and law as an indicator of gender-relations in contemporary China. In the end, I saw general rights and freedoms, including for women, improving based on national development goals, much in line with the same economic-utility model as we observed in the first section and as we observed marginal raising of women's social position when the Communist Revolution needed all hands on deck. My viewpoint, formed via analysis of existing laws and the wide acceptance of capitalism and liberalism in tune with Chinese economic policy, leads me to believe that despite a burgeoning concern for morals and attempts at increased state control of media, China is well on its way to becoming a capitalistic hegemony in all but name. As an entrenched government settles in amidst the population's placation with a rising living standard, there exists an
implicit struggle against newly-empowered citizens who want the rights they see other nations giving to their citizens. I see China becoming the new America, and being forced to trade in even the best aspects of the old collectivist mentality for the glamour of the new and capitalist/individualistic.

Whether the blossoming Chinese feminist movement and positive social-awareness trends created by education and technological proliferation have any influence on the government's agenda before this status is achieved remains to be seen. The rise of feminism, however, is a beacon of potential positive change.

The popularization of *One Piece* and consumption of *shonen manga’s* innately-gendered messages within China helps substantiate the argument that Chinese culture has long been innately patriarchal, but also reveals that the country's people are increasingly becoming open to the inevitable transfer of ideas created in an interconnected world. Whether gender relations change for better or for worse, however, is up to larger, intersecting forces, and how the government reacts to what it views as a challenge to its centralized power structure.
SECTION I: THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

In the famous thought experiment where listeners are asked to consider time on a scale the size of their own outstretched arms, human history is revealed to make up such a small part of that distance that it could be figuratively erased by a few swipes of a nail file. In that sliver of time, few countries have enjoyed more time on Earth than China. I find myself returning to metaphors of creation and natural processes whenever I write about China, because nothing but evolution, in my mind, seems to capture its size and scale through time, the *eminence* of the entity. Like a vast, evolving creature of a genus all its own, China has run a five-thousand year gamut of political phenotypes: from distant kingdoms to a messy cluster of warring states, to a great fiefdom united off and on by a dynastic cycle of reprisal and rebellion, to a war-torn collection of ethnicities somehow united by national identity, to a conglomerated nation ducking between Communism and capitalism like the famous “walking husbands” of the country’s Mosuo minority. On the face of things, China consists of a half-dozen biomes sprawling 3 million square miles, which are home to 56 different ethnic minorities; that’s over fifty separate cultures coexisting in the same national bounds, over a billion individuals speaking thousands of dialects— and one Party attempting to unite them all under a single language, political identity, and religion (or lack thereof— atheism is the espoused religion of the Communist Party). An individual life- a microcosm of this living parade of history- might seem almost as finite in these estimations as our own fingernail-slice of human history. And according to some of those individuals, it’s easy to feel swallowed by the sheer size of their nation and its current political ideology. There’s the face of China, and then there are the *faces* of China: stories hidden in laugh-lines and the curves of smiles; in the scars that show and in those that *don’t*. And no group in the nation has worn more of

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both, through its long parade of history, than China’s women. Having been displaced as one of the “worst places to be a woman” in the last century does not mean that sexism and misogyny have disappeared from China’s “record”, or its modern culture– and understanding how a bias can be so pervasive begins with a look into the past.

First, however, the diversity of experiences in such a large country must be addressed; China has many religious and cultural groups with different standards for female behavior, and there will always be remote exceptions to whatever rules exist. Periods of civic and social unrest in general seem to have allowed the fighters and leaders in women to roam, historically, by creating environments where their gender was less of a social barrier. For example, female foot-soldiers were employed at various times in Chinese history, and several female military leaders (or at least their myths) rose during the various conflicts between dynasties. Names like Shen Yunying and Liu Jinding may not ring in Western ears like the name Mulan, but China has a rich history of ancient women in positions of military power. Most, like Li Xiu/Yang Nian, inherited the position from their fathers after a lifetime of training and education. Rebellions provided ample opportunities for female leaders, from piracy (Ching Shih) and usurping corrupt local leaders (Lu Mu), to autonomy struggles ranging from the Ming dynasty (Gao Guiying and her all-female military unit) and the anti-Japanese guerilla battles of the 1900's (Zhao-Hong Wengao). The thread running between most of these powerful women was an education: being well-read enabled them to learn the arts of war, which leveled the playing field.

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between them and men. This is not to say that they never faced derision or disbelief, but local history remembers them as victors, if widely-taught national history does not.

On the imperial side of things, politics and the arts were other ladders up for women. The best-remembered of politicking females is Dowager Empress Cixi, who rose as regent and tried to instate conservative, non-Western models of governance; a worse example might be Empress Zetian, known for an unfortunate tendency of poisoning her enemies. A long line of female political overseers were employed during the Tang Dynasty, advising both emperors and empresses. It is held that the teacher of Laozi, the founder of Daoism, was a woman, and that one also instructed the first Imperial emperor, Huang Di. Poetesses and painters in Chinese history are almost too numerous to count, and extremely talented ones might find their way into the Imperial Court. Again, women who succeeded in these roles had either a broad education and opportunities, or quite a bit of training, talent, or inherited power— and it must be remembered that these were unusual things for a woman to have, when the period and its climate of gender-inequity are considered. Most women throughout China's history were not so fortunate, and even the aforementioned heroines and female leaders often had to bow to certain societal roles, such as being mothers, filial daughters— and most importantly, wives, a role so tied up in economics that it can be argued women and daughters existed as something not unlike property for a stretch of Chinese history.

I. Economic Theory of Objectification

From my analysis of historical trends, I offer forth a theory regarding the persistence of

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patriarchy in Chinese culture: that a woman's economic value has had a direct effect on how she was/is valued by society. This theory is informed by readings in feminist economics and political-economics, both of which are structuralist concepts put forward by prominent economists and regarded within the academic community as an emergent but vital perspective. I do not claim originality in forwarding the idea, nor can I possibly be the first apply this approach to Chinese history– but explaining this connection is essential to determining the origin of patriarchy I see as creating modern gender issues in China. Feminist economic theory baldly states that female-associated labor is generally undervalued and goes uncounted by economists, which results in or is the product of social perceptions of gendered labor; it calls for a shift in considerations of economy from cookie-cutter theories and income-based calculations to inclusive models that count contributions to society as a labor sector. This means redefining tasks like traditionally-female domestic labor as important economic activity. In places/periods where women are largely responsible for domestic 'chores' or caring for the home, women experience trends of social repression; when her economic contribution increases to include direct income-gathering through trade/business/industry or protecting the nation/home, her socially-perceived freedom and worth increases as well. Given that the majority of Chinese history has included a fairly narrow prescription of domestic-centered roles for women, Chinese womanhood has been accordingly afforded less value in the culture– though as the feminist-economics model advocates, cultural perceptions of women can change (and have, as we will discuss from the Communist Revolution onward), given the right circumstantial incentives.

II. Wifehood and Weddings: A History of Patriarchy

Wifehood was pan-culturally valued by Chinese groups, as it availed women to the actions by

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which they could be considered honorable in patriarchal societies: bearing children and continuing the family name. In the rural history of many countries, China included, the post-Neolithic natural order of survival meant that couples married (and died) young, producing as many “farmhands” to help bring in the harvest as possible. Natal death rates also engendered a preoccupation with reproduction, as one had to produce many children in the hopes that a few would live to working age. These constraints meant a woman’s role was firmly established, both globally and in early Chinese history, as being in and of the home. According to Riane Eisler's *Chalice and the Blade* theory of the global origins of patriarchy, early life was a brutal time in which larger gender roles were being hammered out, and this divide of responsibilities would prove integral to the “blade” of violence and conquest, the products of warrishness, belonging to males and being used against the “chalice” of feminine, domestic strength. This pattern of denigrated domestic roles would, Eisler argues, color history so deeply that we would eventually forget its origins; dominant civilizations (inevitably the most violent ones, to overtake and destroy others) replaced, in the popular vernacular of their religions, earth-mother deities with the tales of male demigods and heroes, and the threat of violence awaited women who questioned, through word or deed, the supremacy of male power.  

Due simply to the cruel brevity and brutality of sustenance existence, girls passed directly from childhood and parental control to bearing children and taking care of the home, while also assisting her husband in the fields and with the livestock; an urban wife might also be expected to produce or sell goods either door-to-door or in the marketplace, in order to supplement the family income (with desperate and contradictory implications for a family’s ‘face’, in later ages). During the early, pre-Confucian and pre-urban age, women's roles in trade and income likely afforded her more freedom of behavior and regard in village society. Indeed, the disagreement between a woman's value within a familial system and her value within a patriarchal society were sometimes hard to reconcile for the purposes of this thesis. It is my belief that this discord existed due

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to Eisler's theorized male historical dominance in determining societal mores.

Given the incredible amount of work she was expected to undertake and how many women managed to rise to the challenge, a woman was, in any setting, a valuable asset to a working man (even, many would argue, the true head of the home in China of old, even when passage along male lines was emphasized). 23 So how do we go from a practical matriarchy to an impractical patriarchy of such an overarching kind that history has nearly forgotten the women who, per Mao, “held up half the sky”? My theory, in line with the aforementioned economic theory of worth-determination for women, is that Chinese marriage rituals, as products of a patriarchal shift, set the proverbial ball rolling for the idea of male ownership of women. The exact origins of bride-pricing are, understandably, lost to history, but modern reasons for requesting bride-prices may at least shed a little light on the concept: One Child Policy-era China leaves the burden of caring for four parents on two sets of shoulders, so proving a husband's wealth is reassuring to the bride's parents. It would have been in any age, really. 24 Historically, making a good marriage also assured that in widowhood, a woman would presumably be able to support herself and continue to live honorably off of her husband's estate. 25 Pre-marriage gifting practices may have begun as goodwill gestures between two families, as a kind of token remittance for the taking away of an able set of hands from the bride’s family— but inequality of material wealth among any population meant that there would always be someone who could pay more for a girl, causing girls in general to be objectified. If she was more desirable to a potential bridegroom she would of course fetch a higher price, so certain values became vital to the process of 'selling' a bride. Without beauty and chastity, a girl’s value as a potential wife went down faster than a failing stock— and so did her societal worth, in one where her primary value to her parents was as the wife of a man in whom the

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majority of the relationship's power would rest.

Marriage celebrations complicated gender issues in historic China by seeming innocuous, but in reality carrying strict social incentives. They were an obvious source of village merriment, which nobody could maliciously object to, and the more rituals surrounding the ceremony, the longer the festivities went on. Emergence of the social construct known as ‘face’ meant a particular cultural emphasis on appearing to be generous and well-off- and marrying off your daughter in style would have been a prime way for a patriarch to show all of his neighbors that he was not “fail[ing] to meet [sic] essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupied”. While the specifics varied by region and the economy of a town, traditional Chinese weddings were/are by no means private or cheap affairs. Following the first consultation of a non-familial intermediary matchmaker, villagers and extended family members took part in countless, regionally-varying rituals involving the wedding and its build-up, from the combing of the bride’s hair, the procession that brought her sedan to the groom’s home, to nattering the couple once they had been delivered via entourage to their chambers for the night. All of these people then had to be fed at a series of banquets, which gradually came to be viewed as the most important part of the ritual because it allowed the bride’s family to display, through menu choice, their deep pockets. The “marriage trade”, whether it intended to or not, may have been one of the first socialized systems of objectification in Chinese society, positing that a girl/wife was “worth” as much as a couple of cows and luxury gifts to her parents. Bride-pricing may have begun with good intentions– but the road to hell is, of course, paved with those.

Likewise, the custom of dowries (reverse bride-prices paid to the groom’s family), intended to

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28 Wolf and Huang, Marriage and Adoption, 200-210.
show politeness to a groom's family for their bride-pricing and give a wife articles that were entirely hers regardless of how the marriage fared, set back equalistic considerations of marriage simply because most of the potential gain from a bride-price was now being payed back to the groom's family, but the cost of wedding banquets still fell on the bride's parents! Too small a dowry could break an engagement, and the best included sums of money as well as expensive items. According to Susan Mann’s *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, girls were conscripted early in adolescence to begin fashioning items for their trousseau, which were a part of their dowry but usually remained sole property of the woman.\(^{29}\) The social necessity of the bride’s family having to supply return gifts and pay for the wedding banquet probably did more than anything to create negative emotion towards daughters, whose bride-prices could be canceled out by the additional cost. In such intimate equations, then, the value of the girl herself might begin to shrink as the economic losses likely to occur by the accomplishment of her only life's purpose weighed on the mind of her parents. Social beliefs about the utility of women would swiftly follow these value-assertions, marrying local beliefs about the superiority of male utility to economic considerations— which of course were largely made by patriarchs. Womens' shift from human beings to property, in the social consciousness, was well underway.

**III. The Dynamics of -ations and -isms: Perceptions of the Female Body and Roles**

The objectification of Chinese women was subtle and cultural, particularly in its association of the female body as a vessel for both children and male pleasure. The association of women with an almost mythical power over life and birth is a well-documented phenomenon in folk religions across the world,\(^{30}\) and in ancient China too a woman's sexuality came to be very deeply culturally entwined with the miracle of fecundity (which was inevitable, in an age before contraceptives). This focus on

\(^{29}\) Mann, *Precious Records*, 265.  
\(^{30}\) Eisler, *Chalice and the Blade*, 16-42.
womens' ability to produce life comes of the aforementioned Neolithic concern with mortality and birth rate as a survival mechanism, but likely retained a basis in larger culture due to the sheer number of sustenance-farmers in China's early population. Unique to China, however, was the belief that gender is a force that must be “balanced”, and the association of the feminine with darkness in Daoist metaphysics. These elements introduce a metaphorical need for subversion, to a utility-focused society, as neither darkness nor plain earth are desirable to an agrarian society (who gains sustenance from farming and manipulating it): darkness must be lit, and the earth must be plowed. Assuming that women carry within them undesirable darkness that must be subsumed by male light, a very tangible metaphor can be found that reiterates through faith the necessity of submission of women to Eisler's male “blade-bearers.” One can easily see why such a myth would take hold so deeply in a patriarchal culture.

The limitation of sex to a mysterious and reproduction-based activity entirely confined to the bounds of matrimony for women is firmly illustrated by the value of chastity/innocence, son-bearing and not besmirching the family's 'face' in Han culture, but also contrasts a well-documented history of prostitution and multiple-wife households, which were largely available solely to men. Indeed, protecting the female form from the taint of questionability garnered by a moment of unsupervised time led to purdah-like confinement of women to their homes, in some traditions. At very least, Ning Tai-tai reflects in her late 19th century biography Daughter of Han that going out had few socially-accepted purposes for a respectable woman in her time: she was either being carried to the home of a man on her wedding day, or going out to sell her body if she lost her man. Male sexual freedoms were thus, in keeping with the bias of patriarchy, much greater than those enjoyed by women- and in attempting to

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33 Mann, *Precious Records*, 175.
repress and control female sexuality along cultural lines, patriarchy managed to simultaneously repress the social worth of women.

The main association of sex, when it came to wives, was their ability to bear children; particularly sons, who experienced a very different world than their sisters would. A daughter would become a woman: a being almost entirely defined by her sexual/procreative nature. Special considerations of keeping her obedient and respectful determined her eventual marriageability, which was of course tied to her ability to perform female sociosexual roles for a husband. This preoccupation with gender differentiation is for the most part a worldwide phenomenon, but reached a kind of zenith among the diverse groups that populated China. In the economic mind-frame of old-time Chinese patriarchy, a girl-child was an expensive entity: she had to be constantly guarded, usually by other women, in order to preserve her chastity; her gynecological issues and appearance had to be cared for, her trousseau laid and her feet bound; her economic utility was limited by the acceptable roles a woman could have in the specific cultural climate, and it cost quite a bit in social effort to sublimate her to social ideals that innately limited and devalued her in comparison to men. From marriage on she became the responsibility of another man and his family, and could give her parents no help from then on unless her husband saw fit (or until she became a widow). And then, worst of all, she might produce even more daughters, bringing not only a new generation of economic burden (when compared to hearty, non-menstruating sons) but shame upon both families, in a tradition where males carried influence! That none of these “flaws” were the girls’ fault probably had a voice— but it was the voice of the oppressed rather than the oppressor, and so was stifled. By the time a Manchu majority took power in 206 B.C and began attempting to universalize Chinese culture, women had been largely socially designated as second-class citizens who did not deserve certain rights, which in turn

35Wolf and Huang, *Marriage and Adoption*, 270.
36Mann, *Gender and Sexuality*, 10.
37Mann, *Gender and Sexuality*, 4, 51, 145.
38Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 680-5
perpetuated patriarchy. This is innately tied to both the social limitations placed per biological sex and the ability of women to choose their sexual partners and activities, which were limited by the very patriarchal entities and cultural ideals that perpetuated the idea of their 'uselessness' as beings.

Nursery rhymes dated from 1800-1900, the latter of which apparently derives from an excerpt of the Confucian Book of Rites, displays how prevalent sexism and strictly-defined roles for women were as cultural facets:

“We keep a dog to watch the house,  
A pig is useful, too  
We keep a cat to catch the mouse  
But what can we do with a girl like you?”

“Ten and three, could weave silk threads  
Ten and four, learned to cut out cloths  
Ten and five, swept strings of k’ung hou lyre  
Ten and six, hummed lines of (Confucius’) Classics...  
Ten and seven, became wife of my lord.”39

In their relegation to the role of objects who existed for primarily sexual and reproductive purposes, women had become, in male perceptions, economic units rather than human lives. For context, consider that when Chinese journalist Xinran interviewed a rural Chinese family who, in the late 80’s literally invited her to dinner while a dying newborn girl stirred feebly in the garbage pile a few feet from the dinner table, the family patriarch’s response to her indignation was that they were not necessarily killing a child; they were just a poor family looking out for their own finances.40 Due to historic accumulation of patriarchal culture-elements like these, China’s modern population now finds critically gender-uneven. A conservative estimate places the number of “missing girls”—women and girls who would exist if gender ratios were consistent—at around eight million individual lives. Sex-

selective practices among parents before and after birth are the prime suspect for this unbalance. Chinese daughters growing up with violence and a distinct sense of worthlessness have, however, hewn from this negativity many songs, poems, tell-all biographies, and even a script called nüshu that continues to be employed only by women in the remote Jiangyoung county of Hunan province. The experiences of nüshu speakers—gender-unique and exacerbated by a rural and closed-off patriarchal culture which kept them from achieving literacy—were something that had to be kept from the ears of men, who by dint of their own cultural experiences would be unlikely to understand or sympathize with them. The need to create your own language to communicate sufferings forgotten by a larger culture indicates fairly extreme pressures on women, to say the least, and is the product of a male-oriented culture pushing away conceptions of female experiences—a practice which is hardly endemic only to Hunan Province (or only China).

It must be noted, however, that outside of Confucian and Han culture women may have enjoyed more relative freedom. Some branches of Buddhism, for example, accepted nuns and encouraged women to partake in pilgrimages, which flew in the face of the seclusion and dependency expected of most Chinese women. In rural and sustenance-farming villages, women likely continued to exhibit moderate power over the economics of survival, depending on varied patriarchal practices and how much of the home and business they handled of necessity. In a home with an opium sot for a patriarch, for example, a wife ran the show or the show stopped due to everyone starving to death. It would in fact be accurate to say that there is no real consensus of “Chinese female experience”, because those could vary greatly from village to village depending on what customs were valued, or even from home

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44 Pruitt, Daughter of Han, 55-59, 221
to home based on how women were willing or able to fight cultural mandates.

IV. “Eat bitter fruit”: The Confucian Mandate

Unfortunately, the title of 'wife' and 'good woman' often meant being expected to tirelessly accept heaping amounts of abuse: abuse that ran the gamut of physical and emotional to sexual and mental. These cruelties were exacerbated by a culture that had accepted females' inferiority, and that as fallen creatures required “instruction”. This method of teaching benefited from the seclusion “good women” were expected to maintain, wherein their closest contacts were members of the extended family. The era's definition of family often helped in sustaining “instructive” environments, and no greater force has existing in shaping (even to this day) Chinese perceptions of family relations and filial responsibility than Confucius, whose works became law during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C-8 A.D).

The simple, hierarchy-based philosophy of Confucianism arose as a supposedly more humane system to counteract the cruelties of emperors and landlords, and was so efficiently officiated as a system of thought that by the Han Dynasty passing a state exam on the Analects was the only way to climb the ladder of coveted civil service positions, since officials were graded by the number of exams on Confucian texts they had passed tests on. Confucianism came with fairly clear-cut rules about who was to be deferred to in interactions between people, based on the participants' age and other qualities of social and relational superiority. The Emperor sat at the top of this pyramid– a development which arguably appealed to the existing monarchical power structure. Confucian proliferation affected women by creating potentially-abusive relationships with entitled higher-ups, such as the husband and father, but also with one's mother-in-law. Already disoriented by having to leave their own families and coming to terms with the shock of their first sexual relations, a young bride came under the authority of her new mother-in-law who could be loving or loveless– and often had the mandate to be both. The

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45 Spence, The Search for Modern China, 61
46 Mann, Precious Records, 61.
relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, who lived under the same roof after the younger married, dictated that the daughter-in-law pay homage to the elder woman by serving her with tireless respect; this meant not only waiting on her mother-in-law hand and foot, but also cooking special foods and abiding by rituals which supposedly guaranteed the elder’s extended life. Even after death, an elder still lived on in the obligation younger family had to tend to their graves.\textsuperscript{47}

But even constant selflessness and deference, however, did not guarantee a new wife the faintest of praise; rather, Confucian hierarchy encouraged mothers-in-law to constantly nitpick, criticize, and embarrass their sons’ wives, in order to keep her daughter-in-law from becoming proud or ‘slacking off’ in their designated roles.\textsuperscript{48} In this relationship we see patriarchy being used to turn women against one another, when they might have found solace (and dangerous unity!) in each others' experiences.

Even before Confucianism, however, we have proven that patriarchal-economic calculations meant that son-bias and the objectification of daughters as “property” were already hallmarks of Chinese society; Confucianism merely solidified nervous religious rituals and existing gender-biases into a social strong-arming tactic wielded against women, it could be argued, to encourage 'strategic' conflict which kept them from unifying and challenging male-delineated models of social behavior.

But the system can still be considered more sinister. By doing as they were told and obeying Confucian culture, mother-in-laws also helped create husbands who were distant and domineering: they raised pampered sons (or at least ones that were treated better than their sisters) who grew accustomed to women who would serve them, and then had to cling to those sons in old age for financial support. Given how essential a son was to a mother’s identity, there was probably a fair amount of jealousy on a mother’s part, as well, when a new wife arrived to 'take him away'. That gave her one more reason to nitpick her daughter-in-law, on top of having her own respectability riding on how subservient said girl turned out to be. If a girl-child misbehaved or new wife bolted back home to

\textsuperscript{47}Mo, Shen, “Women In and Behind Rhymes”, 133.
\textsuperscript{48}Pruitt, \textit{A Daughter of Han}, 31, 224.
escape, talked back to her husband within gossiping distance of the servants, or wore her hair provocatively, blame rested greatly on other women in her family for not teaching the girl how to be a “proper”, selfless wife.49 “Good” Chinese women, it seems, had to remain almost neurotic about their honor for their entire lives lest any event call into question their spotless record of cultivating “The Four Virtues”: chastity, appearance, speech (or lack thereof), and housework.50 It seems a little too convenient to the prevailing social order that they would became desperate and even cruel in their old age, when a ‘usurping’ young wife under their charge didn’t “fulfill” their “duties”. Too convenient by half, if patriarchy’s intention was to keep them locked up in their own worlds far removed from the privilege and freedom of the one experienced by men.

But Confucianism wasn't the only philosophy to inform sexist gender relations. A quote from the I-Ching sums up the direction from which Confucian's ideas about gender came:

"The wife has her correct place in the inner (trigram), and the man his correct place in the outer. That man and woman occupy their correct places is the great righteousness shown (in the relation and positions of) heaven and earth... Let the husband be indeed husband, and the wife wife:--then will the family be in its normal state. Bring the family to that state, and all under heaven will be established...”51

Daoism falls much in line with the constrictive role-determination which defines Confucian gender and age hierarchies, with the notable exception that in Daoism the onus for maintenance of the metaphysical scaffolding of the entire earthly realm is placed squarely on the shoulders of men and women fulfilling their appropriate social roles. This idea of universal harmony in cohesion and role-fulfillment has had a major effect on Chinese culture and philosophy, and is reiterated in the Daoist understanding of the metaphysical construction of the universe. When we consider the elemental concepts of Yin and Yang, which Daoism holds to be a major aspect of the structure of the universe, a fixation on maintaining halves of a whole leads to the categorization of many elements into opposing forces which

49Ibid 28, 31
50Spence, The Search for Modern China, 416.
51Morales, “Kia Zan [Household].”
must be kept in equal measure. Dark and light balance each other, just as heaven and earth must— and in
gender constructs, women are held to possess the Yin, or dark and earthly matter which counter-
balances mens' light and sky.\textsuperscript{52} It is quite easy to see the reasoning utilized by an underlying patriarchal
culture which celebrated Daoism's attribution of light, which is desirable and viewed as purer and more
righteous than darkness (for an English example, consider Western imperialist forces justifying
colonialism as “bringing light” to the “dark heart of Africa”), to men. Examining social expectations,
however, makes it seem is strange that women should have been handed the metaphor of darkness,
considering the contemporary focus on their purity and piety as moral character determinants. It is
tempting to assume that the 'ignorance' and 'void' of darkness (which of course needed to be filled) fit
better with existing patriarchal gender-myths of male superiority, and thus these concepts were handed,
in Daoism, to females. This subtle thumb-biting at the female gender is especially ironic considering
that its founder, Laozi, was believed to have been taught by a woman, and that the Tao is often
described in feminine terms (womb; void; even the “Mysterious Female”).\textsuperscript{53} Either way, I believe that
Confucian and Daoist focus on the concept of balance— on the zero-sum belief that women are another
elemental force which must be kept at bay by the innately-preferred male “light,” managed like the
earth, and subsumed by duties within the system that went unconsidered by male philosophers— which
resonated with patriarchal culture, which kept power via the Eisler model and silenced by the “blade”
all opposing, female voices who would have asked, “Why does light get to define our culture and
subsequent social practices?” China would remain out of balance, made top-heavy by patriarchy, for
quite some time, in fact: too much “light and sky” forgetting that “darkness and earth” had faces and
basic rights.

\textsuperscript{52}Hinsch, \textit{Women in Early Imperial China}, 165-211.
\textsuperscript{53}Evgueni A. Tortchinov, “The Doctrine of the "Mysterious Female" in Taoism,” \textit{Kheper Association},
http://www.kheper.net/topics/Taoism/Mystfem.html.
V: Relative Happiness

But did women in this age enjoy the home as at least a kind of sphere of their own, the way 1950’s housewives in the U.S claimed to have? It's difficult to say, and depends greatly on the era which is being analyzed. The confinement of women to the realm of the home didn’t stop them from constructing their own universes or having personalities, wishes, and dreams; it did severely limit them, however. In the words of Weimin Mo, “There was always a sense of lonesomeness in the inner chambers of women in China.”\(^\text{54}\) While dominant first wives might enjoy a “nation” of their own within the confines of their homes, they were under constant pressure of social custom to dress, act, and even express their perfectly-natural emotions in socially-sanctioned ways. In the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, set in 1920’s China and based on a 1990’s short story, the protagonist is a college-educated woman “given the choice to marry” after the death of her father and her own subsequent loss of independence and financial security as a result (she really didn't have a choice, some would argue). The husband in question has evidently elected to uphold a system of favor and deprivation, as per his right as the patriarch. The cast of multiple wives are defined almost entirely by the negative personality traits that were born from their cloistered, male-centric existences; the first wife is a tragic relic, having borne a son and then been outpaced sexually by a younger wife; the second wife turns out to be the villain; the third wife is a spoiled opera singer who cheats to escape the marriage she did not choose; and the fourth wife, the protagonist, cannot handle all of this stress and, in a moment of weakness, blurts out the information which ends up getting the third wife killed by the husband, who orchestrates an honor-killing to regain face after the third wife's affair. The drama speaks for itself, and so many unsettling gender-political issues existing in the mind-numbing tedium of the Chen household makes the women seem almost like politicians of a tiny, bizarre nation ruled by a male autocrat whom they must appease at all costs. One of the film’s key elements involves the ceremonial hanging of a red lantern (itself an

\(^\text{54}\)Mo, Shen, Women in and Behind Rhymes, 176
insulting relic of prostitution) outside the bedroom of the woman who will have the husband’s company in bed that night, and for doing so is entitled to receive certain luxuries the next day. Imagine the climax of activity in your day amounting to that, with all its incumbent anxieties and the competition you must continually face among the only women you’re allowed to interact with. Imagine plotting and constantly drowning in wifely politics, standing outside in a line of competitors, cattle in a row, in the hope that your husband will mark you as the evening’s ‘whore’ and favor you for the evening, in exchange for a few luxuries. The entire climate of her home, supposedly a Chinese woman’s sphere of control, changed with the comings and goings of men…which seems as good an indication as any that it was not her domain at all, but a mercurial place where she was allowed to exist in lieu of a life of her own.

In summation, traditional marriage was a recipe for unhappiness all around- and misery increased exponentially when the additional hierarchy of multiple wives classed by seniority came into the picture.

VI. Expectations and Incrimination

Pre-Mao (1700-1950) expectations for “good” Chinese women could thus be summed up as follows:

- Urban: She could afford to stay in the house, out of sight and out of mind
  Rural: She was a hard-worker and physically strong
- She had to produce sons who would carry on the husband's family name
- She had to have a social record of chastity and respectability
- She came from a respectable family
- She had to be beautiful, charming, or well-off, to attract a husband
- She had to have small feet (which will be discussed presently)

Ning Tai-Tai recalls, in an autobiography that covers the late 18- and early-to-mid 1900's, that it

55Matthew, “Raise the Red Lantern (1991).”
56While not directly addressed in Raise The Red Lantern, we should note that in the 1900-era climate of gender relations, consent and female pleasure were unlikely to be foremost in a man's mind. Marital rape would not be considered a crime for many years in China.
was her family’s outright starvation which finally motivated her to leave the grounds of her husband’s home. She had to in order to supply some kind of income, which her husband provided but immediately spent on opium— and despite wide knowledge that the man was an addict who had sold the clothes off his wife’s back, everything in their home, and even his own daughter to support his habit, some of the neighbors still judged her for leaving the home to work. Luckily, Ning Tai-tai had the stubborn willpower to prioritize the lives of her children (and her own) over maintaining honor. The pervasiveness of these tropes about “good women” cannot be overemphasized; they were so deeply ingrained in women’s perceptions of themselves that death was considered preferable to the loss of honor. In countries where honor killings and female suicide following assault remain endemic, the strength of these ideas about female worth still survive as cultural norms. Part of the tragedy is that these are not ideals chosen by the women who are themselves being strangled or set on fire; they are chosen by men, and that is what makes them rule of law for women in patriarchal cultures.

And girls who failed to find a good husband? Besides the insult of being blamed for life-altering circumstances determined entirely by social customs outside their sphere of control, they were forced to become lowly street hawkers, fell into prostitution, opium addiction, or spent their lives as servants-cum-slaves who might be considered sexual free pickings for the patriarch of the family they served, in order to eat. It is always possible that in the event that her parents deigned to support her, an unmarried woman would be allowed to exist as a fulfilled and relatively free entity— but as we’ve already addressed, those stories do not make up the majority of experiences. Even women-warriors for the most part rose to greatness from positions of servitude or by dint of a man’s influence, such as inheriting a father’s position. It was also known, in Ning Tai-tai’s account, that some daughters-in-

57 Pruitt, *Daughter of Han*, 55, 72
58 Mann, *Gender and Sexuality*, 121-123
59 Ibid., 55-58
laws would turn the tables on mothers-in-law and make them miserable (although elder abuse was a risky social crime to commit).\textsuperscript{61}

Nothing, however, paints a better picture of institutionalized Chinese misogyny than foot-binding. This uniquely-female form of body modification dates back to the tenth century (a concubine reportedly did this to please the emperor),\textsuperscript{62} but held presence in China as a tradition from the 12th century to the 20th.\textsuperscript{63} Literature on foot-binding is dotted with pictures of three-inch, rotting stumps in pretty little shoes; the juxtaposition between those little lumps of crushed toes and what they were meant to be—beautiful and sexy— is perhaps the starkest example of society’s preoccupation with the female form gone completely awry. Like many forms of female body modification, it was done in the name of fashion and beauty; large feet were socially attributed to members of rural minorities, which the majority Manchu (early history) and Han (later history) were eager to divorce themselves from in the creation of a shared ethnic identity— as most domineering groups, from the Aryans to the Hutus, have been desirous of.\textsuperscript{64} A woman with big feet, in the evolving social conscious, was probably the country-bumpkin daughter of a poor man who had given her away for a steal of a bride-price— which reflected poorly on her husband, who might have taken such a route to obtain a wife because he was either not as well-off as he said he was, or something was wrong with his family. The race (no pun intended) for smaller feet was in part fueled by the incentive to turn a girl into a better economic investment,\textsuperscript{65} which eventually generated one of the most horrific gendered practices in any society.

Foot-binding had to begin early in order to be successful, and the best age was considered to be between five to seven years old; a girl’s choice in the matter was, at that age, obviously moot. Wet cloth

\textsuperscript{61}Pruitt, \textit{Daughter of Han}, 64.
\textsuperscript{64}Spence, \textit{The Search for Modern China}, 41-48.
\textsuperscript{65}Mann, \textit{Precious Records}, 167.
was tightly bound around the little girl’s foot to fold the toes underneath the foot, leaving her to hobble around on blood-restricted lumps of numb flesh. If her growing bones did not form in the way the cloth demanded (i.e. curling under her own foot), they were slowly broken by continued pressure from the bindings; after this they hopefully regrew in proper form.\(^{66}\) Countless girls, in an age before record-keeping or antiseptics, likely died of infections and in unspeakable pain. And through all of this a growing girl was expected to help around the house and squat to use traditional toilets (although poorer families tended to start binding around puberty to preserve a daughter’s utility as a field-worker).\(^{67}\)

This crippling served dual purpose as a gesture of control over a girl’s ability to do as she pleased, as another one of Mo and Shen’s collected nursery rhymes reveals:

> “There was a little girl  
> Who would run upon the street…  
> Her mother lost control of her  
> Until she bound her feet,  
> But now she’s just as good (a) girl  
> As you will ever meet!”\(^{68}\)

When done “right,” the process produced a foot that was literally bent under itself, leaving toes located beside and even underneath the heel. The goal, as Susan Mann's exhaustive *Precious Records* reveals, was for a future husband to be able to cup these “little lotus blossoms” (concealed in tiny embroidered shoes) within his hand; the practical meaning of this was that a seven-inch limb had to somehow become a three to five inch one.\(^{69}\) Being crippled in this was, however, had perks— not only were you considered a more eligible bachelorette, it implied that you could afford servants to carry you around all the time (some families who could hardly afford to seclude and cripple a valuable worker bound their daughters’ feet in hopes of bringing up their value in the marriage market, as an investment

\(^{66}\) Mann, *Precious Records*, 54.  
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 55.  
\(^{68}\) Mo, Shen, *Women In and Behind Rhymes*, 9.  
\(^{69}\) Mann, *Precious Records*, 56.
in the family's future fortunes). By the time it was made illegal in the first decade of the 1900's, millions of girls had been mutilated, all in a quest to reflect positively on their family's name through their own economic viability-- because the alternative was being less than desirable as a bride, resulting in an even more unequal marriage than the prettiest-footed girl could expect.

Foot-binding was a direct outgrowth of socially-acceptable sexism, just as corsets and crinoline were in Western culture. It was not about empowerment, but beautification to a male standard; not betterment of the gender, but an exercise in desperation. There was literally a moment in the span of Chinese history where a woman could not afford to have functional feet, and risked even greater misery with them. But even more troubling is the notion that the trend of footbinding was perpetuated because women were unable to form their own economic/social worth, in a repressive, patriarchal system.

**VI: Change on the Horizon: Communism and Gender**

Between dowries, extreme body and conduct standards, institutionalized male-bias, restrictive social practices and outright neglect, womanhood in old China might seem calculated to inspire misery. This changed somewhat during the Communist Revolution, which replaced antiquated forms of misogyny with new, modern ones that provided at least some semblance of social equality. The Communist Revolution is often praised for bringing about a new age of freedoms and equality for women, but in my mind, the actual process of granting freedoms was less about recognizing the implicit worth of women as human beings, and more about creating an additional, regime-supporting economic quotient of new workers.

As a grassroots, guerilla outgrowth, Communism needed every pair of hands it could get in order to unify a war-torn and largely Japanese-colonized collection of agrarian peasants. Making Glorious Revolution became of this necessity a quest without genders-- and in spite of what all this

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70Ibid., 56-58.
fervor eventually came to, this was a positive development for Chinese women. It is widely acknowledged—both in global cultures and among academics—that a woman’s decision-making capabilities and social weight are viewed more positively when she has vested involvement in generating income, changing minds and thus social customs about women as human beings.\textsuperscript{71} With war and work in this era came a novel, leveled playing-field where a female factory worker was acknowledged as being able to complete the same tasks a male worker could, and as honorable a martyr as any other. In response to the murmurings which must have arisen from conservative Chinese at the time, Mao famously declared that “women held up half of the sky”, at which point gender equality became word of law due to said leader’s increasingly-constrictive cult of personality. The Four Olds Campaign to eliminate remnants of old culture, in which relics, antiques, and foreign products were smashed and burned, represented a material movement away from both non-socialist culture and antiquated ideas,\textsuperscript{72} of which traditions like foot-binding and massive wedding celebrations were part and parcel. Whatever its intentions or basis, it must be acknowledged that the Communist Era brought about sweeping new freedoms for women as their societal value became something worth protecting. Divorces were explicitly provided for in the New Marriage Law,\textsuperscript{73} and practices like child marriage, foot-binding, and seclusion lost their weight as social practices in deference to the toil for Glorious Revolution. Some quotations from the \textit{Little Red Book} are quite feminist in nature, and imply that the Socialist Utopia is a haven of gender equality:

“\textit{In order to build a great socialist society it is of the utmost importance to arouse the broad masses of women to join in productive activity. Men and women must receive equal pay for equal work in production.}”\textsuperscript{74}

“\textit{Protect the interests of the youth, women and children - provide assistance to young students who cannot afford to continue their studies, help the youth and women to organize in order

\textsuperscript{71}Kristof and WuDunn, \textit{Half the Sky}, 191
\textsuperscript{72}Spence, \textit{The Search for Modern China}, 614-615.
\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., 707-708.
to participate on an equal footing in all work useful to the war effort and to social progress, ensure freedom of marriage and equality as between men and women...”

But some quotes reveal a possible ulterior motive behind the mobilization of women:

“With the completion of agricultural cooperation, many co-operatives are finding themselves short of labour. It has become necessary to arouse the great mass of women who did not work in the fields before to take their place on the labour front.... China's women are a vast reserve of labour power.”

Mao is credited with being a bit of a feminist and quite concerned with woman's rights as an aspect of general social development, and on the individual level that was a good thing– but however much the Red Guards quoted and hero-worshipped Mao, not all of his sentiments translated into national policy. I find myself completely resonating with and calling upon Lily Harper-Hinton's excellent essay, “Chinese Women: Move But Not Leap Forward” for proof of how Communism failed the very women it promised liberation to. Whatever Mao the individual hoped, the failure of the Party to provide social education about women's worth seems, to me, to reveal that this shift in female status was merely opportunistic in nature. It was meant to collect human capital from a repressed group who deserved so much more than opportunistic scraps from the regime's table.

Multiple policy 'ground failures' undercut the idea that Communism was primarily concerned with creating real social trends of equity, such as ensuring role variety and combatting harmful patriarchal ideas in society. Helpful, “feminist” policies under Maoism included the creation of daycares so women could return to work– but these women were also working like men, being worked and controlled by the regime, and spent little time with their children regardless of their desire to do so. There was no choice in roles for mothers (or fathers, for that matter). Collective work communes often handed payments for unit (family) labor to a male and labeled traditional female labor, like the

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75Mao, “Quotations.”
76Ibid.
agrarian work we've already asserted afforded women freedom and influence in village structures, as
'unrevolutionary'. The breakdown of legal and judicial processes during the violence of the Cultural
Revolution and Red Guard infighting dismantled even processes established to assist women– and in
the chaos of political shifting and infighting, the patriarchal mentalities which empower rapists and
oppressors the world over went unchallenged. Schools became war grounds, and all forms of
education– especially sexual education– went out the window, compounding illiteracy and the power
imbalance women already faced. The difference between ideology and action would become
painfully manifest as the Revolution ground on. Just as Communism failed to meet its Utopian goals in
land and social reform, so too did the opportunistic changing of women's status fail to completely
liberate China from ingrained patriarchal habits – even after the Arduous March sought to bring city-
dweller's “civilized” culture to the far provinces. Indeed, this lack of real regard for women's rights
managed to bleed into the inevitable corruption that made would make the Communist Worker’s
Paradise a hell on earth: female workers were encouraged to work only when it met Party goals within
local economic spheres and told to go back to the kitchen when it didn't; they were subject to Party-
mandated marriages with partners they might not have willingly chosen, separated from their loved
ones; they suffered due to an interrupted medical infrastructure during the worst of the age's politic
strife, and were victimized due to their socially-mandated ignorance regarding sex. And let us not
forget that, alongside men, women were being policed by zealous opportunists within a system that
punished the remotest forms of “though disloyalty” along completely corrupted lines. Legends of the

81 Spence, The Search for Modern China, 405-406.
83 Wei Xu, “From Marriage Revolution to Revolutionary Marriage: Marriage Practice of the Chinese Communist Party
in Modern Era, 1910s-1950s” (Phd diss., University of Western Ontario, August 2011), 191-195.
84 David Rennie, “Sex Secrets of the Cultural Revolution: David Rennie Reviews The Good Women of China by
Xinran,” The Telegraph, August 3, 2002, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4728441/Sex-secrets-of-the-Cultural-
Revolution.html.
period rarely depict the largely-unaddressed reality of Chinese women's sufferings: Xinran’s *The Good Women of China* is an underread catalogue of heart-wrenching stories relayed by the real women who survived this period, all of whom told stories of suffering great emotional duress, discrimination, assault, sexual repression, or violence. The revolution so hoped for did not, it seems, manage to communicate pan-culturally such concepts as the sovereignty of the female body or human-rights considerations, as violence still ruled in the rural provinces and sexism lived on in the urban centers. Any feminism Mao espoused was, unfortunately, short-lived and became policy largely through the lens of women's economic vitality to the Revolution, rather than their innate worth. While it did provide a brief period of unifying nationalism, Communism in practice failed to defeat sexism in Chinese culture. It gave women a brief taste of equality as economic units, but ultimately did not leave them on equal footing with men. The end of the Communist era began with the death of Mao, and subsequent collapse of the personality cult that had once placated and oppressed the population into silence; an entire population was waking up from political hypnosis, and they were angry. The far-fetched industrialization targets of the regime had not been met; swathes of arable land had been destroyed by short-sighted agricultural techniques; and a generation of former Red Guards who had been denied formal education during the period’s political unrest were coming back to the cities in search of work. There was nothing for it in the mind of Deng Xiaopeng, the leader who proceeded Mao, but to begin reassuming a market economy during his rule. His reforms rushed to fill the vacuum of material provision left by the State, which would continue to oversee the management of a socialist agenda; it continues to do so to this day, making modern China’s political status an amalgam of controlled capitalism and an odd kind of Communism that is neither Marxist or Leninist in basic nature.

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66 Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 606-608.
67 Ibid, 739.
VII: Conclusions

China remains a developing nation with great aspirations, of which increased standards of living and an enlarged middle-class are important economic goals. The nation plans to create this while remaining collectivist in ideology, relatively free of political opposition, and altruistic in its Socialist dispersion of resources. In practice, however, altruism has never managed to run a government for long; corruption inevitably seeps in, and inequality reasserts itself as a social force. Today, a Chinese woman is still limited by the socioeconomic position she was born into: a poor girl in Xinjiang province and a middle-class Beijing one, even if they possess the same mental prowess, will face very different journeys to obtaining a middle-class lifestyle. One can easily guess which is the easier route. Party membership and a college education (in addition to a good helping of guanxi) remain essential to success at home, while the rich can afford to send their children abroad, away from crowded and painfully competitive Chinese universities.

But isn’t the government afraid of some of their most powerful potential economic units, foreign-educated students who may be female, bringing back foreign ideas and contaminants—like the idea that a fossilized patriarchy shouldn’t affect their paychecks? Two factors help prevent change on this front: first, China’s government places an emphasis on science and industry as the main agents of modernization, meaning that scientists are the cream of the social crop at this time. Existing patriarchal biases preempt the problem of wave-making women by ensuring a relatively low number of government-sponsored female students go abroad to begin with (although it is a larger number than that of most Asian countries). Indeed, many countries struggle with low ratios of female scientists due to

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88 An integral aspect of Chinese social relations, guanxi refers to the network of people who will help you because they're acquainted with you or your family, or who are willing to help you because you once helped them. For example, when I was in Beijing and came down with pneumonia, the Shanghai-dwelling family of one of my father’s Chinese-American coworkers offered, sweetly, to come care for me. Because my father, whom they had never met, had been kind to their daughter, these strangers were willing to do him the same favor. Guanxi can feel forced and opportunistic at times, according to some, but its kindness will always stand out to me.


90 Machiko Matsui, "Gender Role Perceptions of Japanese and Chinese Female Students in American Universities,"
global patriarchal trends involving the education of women, which forged early science as a practically all-male field.⁹¹ The majority of female Chinese study-abroad students will do so while being privately-funded— but the government has other reasons to suspect that they’ll eventually return and acquiesce, even without financial obligation hanging over their heads. A recent study of Chinese and Japanese female exchange students showed that the continued stream of socialist propaganda delivered to Chinese students during mandatory pre-collegiate education may make those sent abroad feel less comfortable with America’s lack of the collectivist social tendencies they are more comfortable with; the women analyzed in this study said that they isolated themselves among fellow Chinese students during their stays in America due to this cultural dissonance, and ultimately returned to their home country in greater numbers to pursue work. The students' preference for home was clear in their positive language when they spoke of home, and that they did not feel they would be discriminated against in the Chinese job market despite an acknowledged trend against hiring women and in contrast to the dread of discrimination felt in comparison students from Japan.⁹² Far from making absolutist statements, I mention this study to show that culture still exerts a great power (both supportive and restrictive) over Chinese women, even those who enjoy the opportunity to see other places and ways of life. China’s strides forward in gender-equality mean that these women return home relatively free of the dread of discrimination faced by returning Japanese women in the same study.⁹³

In a way, the quasi-Socialism and collectivist group-mentality of modern China means that the sexism of old China has been tempered when it comes to the business of generating money: a loyal businesswoman is almost as good as a loyal businessman, economically speaking. Similarly, a combination of the infamous One-Child policy and a burgeoning middle-class means that girls born to

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⁹²Matsui, “Gender Role Perceptions,” 370-376.

⁹³Ibid., 375.
urban families are largely considered just as valuable to their parents as a son (in sheer economic terms, a girl no longer costs the family as much in bride-money, is not considered “risky” or worthless because she can have a career, and can thus support herself and her parents in their old age). Granted, a daughter remains just as bound by culture as a son in her filial responsibilities: Chinese students of both genders report pressure from parents for them to pursue certain types of careers (usually medicine or accounting), and sometimes pursue those careers in spite of their own wishes, out of a sense of loyalty. The exchange many of them make, in this equation, is that of their dreams for the support and security of their family. This development carries an almost Neo-Confucian flavor in its anxieties over independence, and appears to be how thousands of years of filial piety is translating itself into an evolving modern culture. How patriarchalism will do so remains to be seen.

SECTION II: THE PIRATES AND THE PATRIARCHY

Character Studies Introduction: Why One Piece?

It's no secret to manga fans that some series are universally well-known, and that most of these 'core series' come from the shonen genre. In East Asia, One Piece is definitely a classic on the rise; the series enjoys enormous popularity both at home, in Japan, and abroad. In China, I was told by multiple college students that One Piece had been a favorite of theirs since childhood, that the series provided them with fond and nostalgic memories, and was still interesting enough even years later to be worth reading. Global fans' love of the series cannot be stopped even by copyright law: in China, One Piece, like most manga, is widely distributed through 'fan-scans' and extralegal websites in lieu of formal publishing ventures. As ironic as it may seem that a manga about pirates is often pirated, it's even more interesting to observe that One Piece is yet another instance of back-and-forth cultural transmission between China and Japan. Much as imperial China's writing system and traditions once influenced an infant Japanese society and culture, Japanese media now constitutes a form of information transmission that is pouring developed-world values and schema into a nation hungry to catch up with the world. This is important because representations in manga reflect values that were substantiated in Japanese history, and when it comes to shonen manga, some models are sexist in nature.

It can be argued that the most durable of cultural concepts the world over has been patriarchy, and despite the march of time and political change, Japan is no exception. As a new center of media dispersion, Japan is amplifying its own views of women, via manga, to a new global audience. Does the absorption of sexist representation in China, then, reflect a similar cultural concept of women and
their expected experiences within Chinese culture? In examining three of *One Piece*’s main female characters, we will attempt to measure how resonant the experiences of Nami, Nico Robin, and Boa Hancock are with those of modern Chinese women across China’s various class and socioeconomic lines.

**Character Study 1: Nami**

*Sexualization and Objectification*

**I. Character Introduction**

“Cat Burglar” Nami was the first female member of the Straw Hat crew, the second to officially join protagonist Luffy, and the first to do so on terms so robustly her own: having lured in the henchmen of book one’s Big Bad, our first view of Nami in the *manga* is of a tactically-minded, intelligent woman who thinks on her feet to ally herself with Luffy in the hope that he will eliminate the henchmen who are after her. A specialized thief of pirates, Nami then captures and turns Luffy in to the villain in order to access the ship, so she can steal his vast hoard of gold- a decision she later reverses by saving Luffy from his clutches.  

From the get-go, Nami is morally ambiguous, appearing to shift loyalties at the drop of a hat, and often coming out the better of her intrigues (with a sack full of gold to boot). For a genre known to oversexualize or infantilize female characters, Nami’s initial appearance is unspectacular (which is to say she looks like a relatively normal female); she doesn’t possess a body that bodes well for gratuitous displays of fan-service, she isn’t a fighter on terms with

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96 A well-known term among fans, fan-service refers to gratuitous displays of female characters in sexualized circumstances or clothing, which has the criminally-obvious goal of increasing male readership and selling additional merchandise. Examples include 'boob physics' (where breasts jiggle in unnatural ways, even during serious moments), 'panty shots' (selective angling of drawings to highlight females' legs, breasts, and behinds), and the 'onsen trope' (the characters WILL go to a bathhouse/hot-spring at some point, and the guys WILL end up peeping into the women's area).
Zolo, and doesn’t have the comic personality of Ussop. Her contribution to the crew as a navigator makes her an important member for several arcs, but early on, Nami is usually conspicuous by her absence from scenes of combat; the storylines before her own character arc usually send her out thieving while the rest of the crew beats up on bad guys. Further credit must be given to the series in that Nami’s motives and actions as a thief are eventually developed beyond a general “duplicitous vixen”, “damsel in distress”, or “fickle female” stereotype. In a world where personal goals have historically driven greedy pirates to acts of domineering brutality and left them the only real authority, Nami’s actions are not depraved, nor the mark of an innately-duplicitous personality. The revelation of her backstory shows that she has been eminently logical in every action, even ones that confused both the uninformed Straw Hatters and readers. Furthermore, Nami does not speak of regret for her extensive acts of theft: she is assured enough in her own morality and strength of will that it is merely the destruction of her accumulated efforts that drives her to a private emotional display and meaning-drenched self-mutilation. Nami’s incredible resolve is a portent of inner strength forged by the violence that took her mother away— and a brilliant, self-made symbol of defiance to the current world order, which might very well resonate with China's growing feminist movement.\(^97\)

Coupled with her “normal” looks and emphasis on clever strategy, Nami initially seems to be a manifestation of women’s ability to compete even in a hyper-masculine world of stylized pirates and greed. Unfortunately, this is not what Nami is allowed to stay, though a combination of lazy writing informed by ridiculous female stereotypes and her being forced into roles patently too small for her potential.

II. Motivations/Backstory

Very suddenly at the end of the Baratie arc, Nami is apparently upset when she spots the Wanted

poster of a criminal named Arlong Park; this leads her to disable two crew members, steal Luffy’s *entire pirate ship*, and set off on her own with a somber second declaration of her apparently one-dimensional motive: “I’m a thief who steals from pirates.” On a first reading, the intricacies of this scene may not be immediately apparent- but the very next story arc makes sure you go back to reevaluate them. The Arlong Park arc brings Nami to the forefront of the story and into full strength as her own character by revealing her traumatic backstory and its influence on her personality: the adopted daughter of a poor farmer, Nami lived on an island that remained trapped in poverty because it was continually exploited and brutalized by marauding pirates. One day, one of those crews happened upon Nami’s mother and killed her in front of the girl, almost directly following Nami having pitched a fight with her mother over the family’s poverty. It was the typical tirade any seven year-old child might have in the face of socioeconomic deprivation they don’t fully understand, but the guilt of this being their final interaction apparently haunts Nami to this day. She was then kidnapped by the pirate who ordered the brutalization of her island, the feared captain Arlong Park. Nami was taken as the crew’s slave and probably would have been killed had Arlong not noticed her considerable talent for map-making. He made Nami an offer: if she worked for him for a set number of years and stole enough gold and treasure during that period, he would allow her to ‘buy back’ her home island, which he would then leave in peace. Though Nami naturally stayed on as navigator for Arlong’s crew, she was not treated kindly by him in the least during this time– but she eventually gained enough capital with him that she was viewed as capable of wandering off to pursue her own criminal agenda (which, tellingly, she chose to do by duplicitously exchanging loyalties with pirates she wished to rob). This association with Arlong and the pirate lifestyle apparently taught her quite a bit, making her an excellent, self-sufficient thief who also garnered a considerable reputation.99

99 Oda, *One Piece*, vol. 8-9, chapters 70-73.
Upon returning to her village after commandeering Luffy's ship, Nami was met coldly by the villagers; apparently her reputation as a member of Arlong’s crew had preceded her, as her quest to buy Cocoyasi Island back from Arlong was hitherto unknown to them. At her mother’s grave, she revealed that she had nearly accumulated the amount that would allow her to do so. Cruelly, Nami had her entire fortune stolen back by a corrupt official of the impotent World Government that very day. After attempting to confront Arlong, whom she suspected of duplicity (he had been paying off said official for years so he could terrorize the island cluster), Nami visibly broke down and began attempting to carve the tattoo she received as a member of his crew out of her arm with a knife. It was a deep moment in Nami’s development, as the formerly-steely thief wrestled with the duplicity and heartlessness of the world in which she was submerged, as well as her own feelings of hopelessness. In her darkest hour, however, Luffy arrived in time to stop her and promised to help. Not only did he kill Arlong, he made a show of destroying the room in which Arlong had imprisoned her as a child, as well as the library of maps she had drawn under duress. He also declared to the world that she was his friend, which Nami’s unshifting loyalty to the crew for the rest of the series shows meant a great deal to her.\footnote{Eiichiro Oda, \textit{One Piece} (vol. 9): \textit{Tears}, trans. Lance Caselman and Mark McMurray (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2005), chapters 80-81.}

\section*{III. Representation #1: Trafficked Women}

Multiple elements of Nami's life, from her enslavement and soldiering under the promise of eventual freedom to a lack of involvement with the battle to free her, allows her to be viewed as a metaphor for a very real form of slavery that exists in the broad spectrum of Chinese females' experiences: human trafficking. We all know that globalization increases the flow of ideas and items, but human capital also makes journeys at the whim of supply and demand- and where economic inequality or a lack of opportunity exist, both genders are poised to be victimized by systems that take
advantage of their desperation. According to United Nations resolution A/RES/55/25, trafficking is primarily defined as:

“[t]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”101

Crucially, these definitions of criminality stand regardless of consent or payment on the part of victims. This last aspect is especially important in an age of great migration sweeps within China, towards urban centers full of the promise of work and to the gender-imbalanced countryside (for foreign women being sold as brides.)102 As a developing country with a strong trend toward urbanization and capitalistic ideals which may encourage a view of human life as a commodity103 China is poised to become a new hub of not just domestic trafficking, but international trafficking as well; it recently gained the appellation of 'destination nation,' according to the UNHCHR, given increased flows of Southeastern Asians into the country.104 Trafficking is, of course, a danger to both genders, but of an estimated 600-8000,000 individuals trafficked globally each year, 80% are estimated to be females feeding either the labor or sex industry.105

Estimates for Chinese trafficking victims, domestic and international, are effectively impossible due to the fundamental nature of shadow-economies to hide from the eye of the law— but the consensus of interviewed traffickers, according to Cindy Yik-Yi Chu, is that trafficking in people has become easier than trafficking in goods; this is because trafficking requires paid guides who know the lay of the

land (and police patrol routes). In short, people are willing to entrust their lives and funds to those who promise to bring them to better circumstances. Secondly, border control and patrol of travelers are difficult endeavors for any nation, let alone one as large as China. This means that enforcing even existing trafficking laws is difficult due to how difficult patrolling such a massive, porous border can be. And finally, extralegal industry has a history in Chinese society since the days of Mao-era distribution failures, and both opportunism and movement beneath the radar of the government are an entrenched industry. For example, prostitution rings are often the domain of organized crime rings, making them more difficult to root out. Trafficking is generally entered into via the promise of work or opportunity elsewhere. For women as well as men, menial, low-paying work that is still better than idleness or starvation can be used as bait by traffickers, who may seize their papers and carry them to places where they do not speak the language and their rights are likely to be marginalized or ignored by the law.

Given the danger, why do potential victims keep paying to be moved around and into China? Yik-Yi Chu points to the city of Fujian as a place where the myth of prosperity is manufactured, as trafficking victims here are wealthier and acquiesce to social forces which demand generation of higher income. The persistence of trafficking, in the case of the historic hub of Fujian, can be seen as a herald of a larger, internal cultural shift which, once limited to a Westward-striving province, has arguably begun to rise in nationwide considerations. In this age, the promise of prosperity carries the force of a new, capitalist, sociocultural impetus to risk the dangers of both poverty and potential abuse for an opportunity to better support oneself and family. In submitting oneself to traffickers, Chinese women are making the decision to take mobility and success into their own hands— but they are also, to

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107 Ibid, 41-43.
some degree, submitting to a cultural norm of gain-based value calculations in tune to the adoption of
capitalistic and individualistic notions within their society. Does trafficking then represent an extralegal
method of female empowerment? Arguably not, considering the sacrifice of rights to security and risk
of abuse associated with placing oneself in another's power. Rather, we should view trafficking as a lie
that is so well-packaged as to be irresistible to the desperate, regardless of consent or 'success stories'
like those concentrated in Fujian. Contributing to China's rise as a human-trafficking hub are two
primary factors: a history of gendered intolerance, and the intractable draw of better wages and status
created through the generation of wealth. Longstanding cultural beliefs about the utility of girls are
naturally stronger in the rural provinces from which the majority of Chinese domestic trafficking
victims come. As a predominantly Han, educated, and Mandarin-speaking hegemony emerges within
those centers, however, those with regional dialects and low education are bound to be swept into lower
roles and held in lower regard by society; social apathy towards the plight of trafficking victims may be
caused by a kind of “othering” based on their socioeconomic and ethnic status, and combines with
sexism and discriminatory, corrupt hiring practices to cause difficulty for trafficking victims lucky
enough to reach their destination safely. China continues to address trafficking as an aspect of general
development: in 2010, China ratified the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in
Persons, Especially Women and Children, (a supplement to the United Nations Convention against
Transnational Organized Crime),\textsuperscript{110} and agreements within ASEAN point to a willingness to begin
addressing the economic, if not human, toll demanded by the industry of trafficking in human— and
predominantly female— misery.\textsuperscript{111}

Nami is an interesting icon for the cause, representing how trafficking victims are often capable
individuals trapped by circumstance rather than any fault of their own, and how hard they must work
for their freedom from both from physical or sexual labor and the mental strength they must build up in
\textsuperscript{110}\textsuperscript{11\textsuperscript{10}}UN A/RES/55/25: United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime.”
\textsuperscript{111}\textsuperscript{11\textsuperscript{11}}Emmers et al., “Institutional Arrangements to Counter Trafficking,” 495-500.
order to keep from giving in to despair. In the pirating world, the suffering of one young girl never seemed to have generated advocates or potential saviors, and Nami accepted her servitude first out of a desire to survive, and then out of a desire to pursue individual justice (which is not unlike individual gain, in some sense), even if it meant compromising her own morals and reputation. Luffy in this equation becomes the genderless advocate who finally steps in out of concern for the ‘invisible’ person’s humanity and helps rescue them—a powerful metaphor, in an age where social awareness has become a kind of currency to NGOs jockeying for funds. Luffy’s straight moral compass in the series, very often manifested as a source of last-ditch physical power, is shown to be a great strength and benefit to him. Is *One Piece* symbolically reminding readers to “strengthen” themselves through altruistic displays of humanity? Only Oda himself knows.

**IV: Troublesome Manga Moment**

In just one arc, Nami manages to go from being an interesting side character possibly acting as a talisman against claims of sexism to a fascinating, admirable female succeeding in a male-dominated world, complete with a relatable story that was fully explained, emotive, and helped bring her full-circle as a character. Unfortunately, after these initial moments in the sun, Nami would fall prey to other stock tropes employed by *shonen* series: a victim of art shift, her breasts began to expand, her legs grew longer and her figure more waspish. Bizarrely, Nami’s visual objectification has been followed by an increase in her combative abilities. She received a considerable power-up in combat-abilities during the fan-favorite Alabasta Arc: she now owns a boa-staff called the Clima-Tract that can control localized atmospheric events, giving her power over the very weather; she also spent most of the timeskip studying weather as it related to navigation, giving her an intellectual power-up as well.112

Nami’s transformation into a battlefield-beauty has its own troubling, gendered implications. The controversy over this new combat ability primarily concerns why she even needs it in the first

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place. Why must the established non-combat character fight, we might ask, after large segments of the 
manga where she’s survived without doing so? Nami fills the highly useful position of navigator and 
has many non-combat strengths; why can’t she negotiate, be fast on her feet, and otherwise aid the crew 
in ways beyond knocking out enemies in the one-on-one fights that shonen loves so much?

What makes this transformation problematic is the delivery; there’s an implication in it that Nami’s 
navigatory, peace-keeping, and social-cohesion roles are no longer enough to make her as ‘cool’ as the 
other characters— an economic consideration, if we understand readership as income for publishers.

Never mind evading killer hurricanes, piloting a water-based ship to the floating city of Skypeia, 
undertaking captaincy duties in the Enies Lobby arc in Luffy’s absence: if you can’t hold your own in a 
battle against oversexualized caricature-women in dominatrix costumes, you’re not of much value.

Big battles like those are traditional shonen fodder, and sticking to that formula has helped 
series with similar combat-focuses (like Naruto, Bleach, or Dragon Ball) consistently at the top of 
popularity lists. But producing “safe” casts of nothing but impervious “Super Saiyans” means that 
character creativity becomes limited, as does the symbolic importance readers can assign to them. In 
the “battle economy” of One Piece, Nami’s vital background duties and other skills have less value, 
and thus have been allowed to take a back seat while another set of increasingly-sexualized skills are 
allowed to take forefront in the plot.

So why does Nami look more feminine, fumble with her weapon despite plenty of practice, and 
ultimately gain a “Happiness Punch” attack that simply consists of her disrobing in order to disarm the 
enemy? Exploitation of the male audience, in short. Bevinbaka’s extensive essay on the blog site 
Feminist Fandom identifies the increased ‘usage’ of Nami’s femininity as a plot device and as cheap

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114In Toriyama Akira’s enormously popular Dragon Ball series, battlers who go “Super Saiyan” unleash untold power so 
great that it changes their appearances, and then whale on each other at great speed while floating in midair. Shonen manga 
fights don’t get more ‘shonen’ than that, and ‘ultimate power’ attacks like this are a staple of combat-based manga.
115Eiichirō Oda, One Piece (vol. 23): Vivi’s Adventure, trans. Lance Caselman (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009), 
chapter 213.
‘eye candy’, in a divorce from her previous, ungendered successes. In a way, Nami is now trapped by patriarchal expectation that a woman is primarily defined by her body: readers expected sexualization and clear gender-expectations, which a strong, ardent character like Nami must be cookie-cuttered to fit. Chinese women can fight against patriarchal perceptions of old and help create the new, through success and career-building in a gains-based society— but Nami, static in her male-controlled series, cannot.

I found one of Amanda D. Wolfe’s posts on her blog ‘Sailing Dreams’ to be a detailed resource: in it she deconstructs chapter 699, ‘Morning Paper’ in which scenes focused on Nami and Nico Robin being accompanied into the bath by mascot-character Chopper and child Momonosuke, respectively, appear. Wolfe claims the chapter is an exercise in ‘male gaze’, which fans anecdotally acknowledged the manga becoming more sexualized following the author’s marriage (and thus increase in sex drive, apparently). In fairness, it must be said that bathing in the company of others is a long-standing Japanese tradition and features prominently in both manga and anime— but this chapter was offensive to Wolfe because of the way in which the two women are suddenly paraded through panels in the nude, accompanied into a private setting by male characters. For Nami, the chapter was also problematic because it depicted her in the opening spread as a princess (apparently a reflection of her non-combat roles) while the other crew members are dressed as knights; it also features her in a ‘male gaze’ panel focused directly on her breasts as she reclines in the water. In placing Nami in the princess’ costume, Oda calls up (perhaps unintentionally) another trope associated with the objectification of women in modern media: The Damsel in Distress, wherein a female character is reduced to the “goal” a male

118 In Japanese bathing tradition one first showers and scrubs themself clean in a separate area, then relaxes in a scalding-hot communal bathtub. Bathing among adults is usually sex-segregated, though children may bathe with parents of either gender until they begin closing in on a pubescent age.
protagonist much “achieve.” Anita Sarkeesian makes a few good points about the abuse of this concept in video games, which arguably began as a simple plot device but is now being ruined by video games that attempt to apply as much misogyny, common tropes, and violent imagery as possible to dress up their game and ‘top’ other ones that feature the same premise. Sarkeesian posits that calling up the Damsel remains problematic because of many media industries’ reluctance to shift male-centric or even misogynistic trends—especially in male-targeted or fighting games—out of a fear of lost sales. Imagery depicting a strong, capable female character as a princess now leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many a feminist due to the position’s association in story-telling as a position of vulnerability, patriarchal control, and male-dependence. In One Piece 699, there was equally little need for this kind of imagery: Nami is simply explaining her weapon’s abilities to a reindeer, and could have done so in any kind of setting— but the opportunity to exploit her body as an attraction was apparently too great to pass up.

V. Representation #2: Migrant and Modern Workers

Being relegated to a lower role based on social perceptions of the value of one's work (which are primarily defined by one's gender) is not a strange sensation for Chinese women, especially in modern times. Chinese women who were recently asked to parade in swimsuits in order to be considered for a stewardess position may have felt that they were being similarly trimmed down to the assets most valued by a sexist corporation in much the way Nami has been forced into more sexualized representations. While the narrow domestic realm was once underappreciated, modern capitalism has created an infrastructure of general worth-improvement based on wage-earning—a phenomenon best illustrated by the contradictory report of “factory girls.” They typically leave home in the countryside

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between their mid-teens to late twenties, traveling with a one-way ticket to the nearest urban center. What they find there are thousands of girls just like them, competing for low-paying, monotonous jobs in the industrial complex of a new China. In her book on the subject, Lisa Chang relates the experiences of female migrant workers in depth, revealing their personal views of such a world; she also attempts to answer the question of why so many girls end up in these institutions in particular, which in her view is that without a son's responsibility to inherit the home, daughters are free to roam and make their own way in the world, far from the constraints of parental control. Once out, some girls send back money according to parental desires or perceived duties— but some don't. Some get lost in the bright lights, rise and then fall, or just disappear; their lives and jobs are fluid; constant flux is the new norm. And in spite of the unstable and arduous lives these girls lead, Chang's interviewees remain relentlessly optimistic: they choose their jobs, haggle with male bosses, learn skills that can help them climb up the occupational ladder, and come of adulthood in an urban setting abounding with goods and commercial pleasures no one in their village could have afforded. If they don't like a job, they leave, search, and network until they find a new one; they learn the wiles of getting ahead and live in dorms to save money, on fake ID cards. And on the whole, they say they're happy; they're addicted to this new life where they can make things happen.

But not all that glitters is gold: for all their newfound freedom, these factory girls still face structural abuses, both class-based and gender-based, and naturally are harassed, discriminated against, working long hours for globally-paltry wages, and remain shockingly under-supported by both larger culture and the government. But in a truly unique reaction that is half-acceptance and half-resignation, the culture springing up in commercial centers like Dongguan, where the majority of the

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124 Ibid, 9-11, 46-47.
125 Ibid, 16-23.
126 Ibid, 4-58, 101.
population is under 30, is seemingly to ignore hardship and strive for personal success\textsuperscript{127}. The message created by so much commercialism and hope in one place is that individual wealth and success are viewed as the way to overcome obstacles, so everyone pursues them at full-tilt. Discriminatory hiring practices mean you change yourself, not the system– because it's a waste of precious energy and time, which could be spent learning a few more English words or working overtime.\textsuperscript{128} It's a sad reaction to see, but at the same time the realism and strength behind it is admirable. Should it be necessary, though? Is that the only way? The crazy rush of revelations from this book can resemble a Beijing intersection: many forces rushing this way and that, positive and yet contradictory. I worry at how much positive cultural change is really taking place, because for all their effort and the new emphasis on wealth as glory, women remain riders rather than drivers of change. As we've already addressed, they face discrimination that in turn faces no great opposition from the government. The lower-classes are effectively on their own, as Chang discovered in her interview with a local mayor and in analyzing the content of a local history museum (which focused so much on commercialism that it never once found time to mention Mao Zedong).\textsuperscript{129} The women's strategy is probably to back social change once they assume a higher social class– but how many will make it, and how many will find the system suits them once they get there? How many men in power would be convinced to change patriarchal habits or discriminatory hiring practices, by the same logic, in a system that serves their male privilege? How much power do women \textit{truly} have, if they're merely succeeding at a game rather than making the rules?

It's extremely hard to make value judgments about how humane or inhumane such a system is, especially when those you would think are suffering believe that bias, stress, and relative poverty are now largely considered, by the women, Chinese creators of development policy, and even social culture to be mere quarters compared to the eventual “jackpot.” I see the culture of places like Dongguan and

\textsuperscript{127}Ibid, 38-39, 85-89. 
\textsuperscript{128}Ibid, 48-60, 114-115. 
\textsuperscript{129}Ibid., 31-32, 39-43.
other factory-based cities as being a highly materialistic and individualized one— which is good for
women immediately, but not end up paying out in lasting social change, given its basis on ever-
changing economic trends. Is it abuse, or empowerment? It may not be for the West to say.

VI: Conclusions

Knowing what we do of ancient China's gender roles, it is certainly a happy thought that China's
female breadwinners are usurping a similar, thousand year-old social trope of Yin and a need for
subversion. In modern patriarchy, reminders of a woman's “place” are similarly sprinkled throughout
the Western social realm (which encroaches now on a China) in small, symbolic ways: the airbrushing
of an underwear model, “Training to be Batman's Wife” t-shirts – and the tropes painted onto and
written into female characters in modern media, like manga. It is only when we begin recognizing the
subtle ways in which patriarchy affects representation that we begin wielding the power to change the
climate of social perception. The emergence of a young, active feminist generation empowered by
education and internet is a milestone in Chinese development, and bodes well because China has the
benefit of learning from the successes (and mistakes) of Western feminism. Even translating the
academic word for 'gender' has, impressively, been undertaken with emphasis on the social perception
of roles, (although conflict inevitably exists between feminists, both here and there, over where to place
emphasis). Technical difficulties aside, it must be celebrated that from behind firewalls and the
battlements of social norms, Chinese feminism is coming of age and beginning to question both social
and leadership norms. Some are already beginning to suspect that individuals have more power than the
government allows them in terms of status- and as a majority group, individual women are beginning to
fight back against sexualized representation in both media and social practices, despite government
backlash in the form of surveillance and censorship. The struggle is an uphill one, as Didi Tatlow's

130Nicola Spakowski, “Gender” Trouble: Feminism in China under the Impact of Western Theory and the Spatialization

“Chinese Women Stalled on Many Fronts,” implies. To her, this burgeoning movement is a struggle against an entrenched central government (which is not above suspicious action and outright crime in order to silence dissidents) and an entrenched patriarchy that has persuaded society that it is an individual woman's responsibility not only to lift themselves up by their bootstraps, but to also protect themselves, by themselves, from an overarching, overpowering patriarchy. Feminism promises the power to do so, and to institute meaningful change. Its existence heralds change— and whether that change must be paid for in dissidence and blood is up to whoever triumphs in the battle of social consciousness and government agenda.

132 Tatlow, “Progress Stalls on Many Fronts.”
Character Study 2: Nico Robin

Abuse and Westernized Body Image

I. Character Introduction

Nico Robin is not unusual in One Piece possessing intelligence and a female identity simultaneously, but earns the adjective due to the fact that she is initially introduced as a villain: Vice-President of the Baroque Works– a criminal organization seeking to seize control of the kingdom of Alabasta– Robin never fully operated under or agreed with leader Crocodile’s ideology, and concealed herself within the organization’s ranks in order to protect herself from outside threats. She hid out on the Going Merry following her failed attempt to assassinate Crocodile, fulfilled by the Straw Hat crew, and later asked to join the pirate crew because now she had nowhere else to go. Most of the crew, in response, were apprehensive of someone who could be so close to an evil power for so long. Robin apparently manages this because, with a massive bounty on her head since childhood, she has been forced to hide herself under the wing of bigger criminals to conceal herself (and her true motivation) from those who sought to turn her in.

Robin is a scholar and archeologist proficient in the dead language of poneglyphs, working toward an ultimate goal of discovering and revealing the secret history the government doesn’t want people to know about. She is a proficient fighter with unique abilities, spends time assisting the Rebellion against the current regime. On the inner front, she has progressed from a distant, quiet hermit to a true member of the Straw Hat family. On the face of things, Robin appears to represent that women can have the best of both worlds: brainy and brawny, clever and capable, but her appearance and additional facts about her life—that she was abused and how this is handled in One Piece, for example—

problematize such a surface reading. Despite being raceless herself, Robin's appearance in the *One Piece* anime additionally illustrates a deeper problem with depictions of minorities in Japanese media, which resonates with a modern Westernization of beauty standards that cast upon a population of women who must resort to dramatic body alteration in order to pursue them.

II. Motivations/Backstory

Robin was the daughter of archeologists, so research and study were in the blood. Her father was lost at sea on a research expedition, and in pursuit of further information on the Poneglyph, a mysterious artifact they hoped could explain a missing segment of history, Robin’s mother Olvia left her with family on the island of Ohara, the home of said Poneglyph and a foremost research library. This was not an agreeable arrangement to Robin or her mother’s brother, who abused young Robin roundly and made sure the girl knew she was a burden on his household. Robin’s Devil Fruit\(^\text{134}\) gave her the ability to spawn and replicate parts of her own body, and frightened children in her age-group; the only place she really felt welcome was at the Tree of Knowledge, a huge library built within the trunk of a massive tree and run by scholars like Clover, who looked after the precocious genius. At the age of eight, Robin was formally inducted to their academic society– but her intention to study the Poneglyph, like her mother, were met was derision from Clover, who wanted to protect her from the tragedy her family had faced in pursuit of the object. Robin ran away in tears, ending up on the beach.

The appearance of a wounded pirate there would change Robin’s life forever: Saul warned her that Marine\(^\text{135}\) battleships were headed for Ohara, intent on destroying the Tree of Knowledge.

Apparently an unadulterated history of the world *did* exist, called the Void Century, and the Poneglyph was in fact a “Rosetta Stone” that would allow the Void Century to be translated– an act which was not

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\(^{134}\)Devil Fruit, when eaten, are the source of the outlandish powers some *One Piece* characters posses and use to fight.

\(^{135}\)The Marines are the naval arm of the World Government, which is run by the Shichibukai, a seven-pirate oligarchy. The Shichibukai are cruel and self-interested leaders who appear late in the series when. Luffy's titular goal, to become King of the Pirates, challenges their world-order.
in line with the wishes of the existing world power, the Shichibukai. Robin’s mother Olvia had in fact been captured and held on one of those ships, and had escaped back to Ohara in time to warn her colleagues at the Tree. They refused to leave, vowing instead to protect their library. As Robin raced back to the Tree and Olvia raced into town to hopefully distract Marine intelligence agents who had already landed, mother and daughter passed one another on the road for the last time. Olvia and Robin were captured and dragged to the Tree, where its academic residents were being arrested. The glyph at the base of the tree was swiftly discovered, at which point the entire island was sentenced to death for treason. They and the entire island would be destroyed using a new weapon known as the “Buster Call.” At the age of eight, Robin watched her home be completely incinerated from a raft commandeered for her by Saul, and was labeled a public enemy for the act of surviving an act of cultural genocide. For twenty years Robin wandered the world with a Marine bounty on her head, being betrayed and betraying in return, until she joined Baroque Works and entered the series during the events of the Alabasta Arc. Backstory-trauma is not uncommon for One Piece characters, living as they do in a world where an impotent world government ruled by former pirates fails to investigate incidents or see justice served equally. The fact that an eight year-old could be labeled a criminal, slandered, and then manage to hide out from “justice” for twenty years is more than proof of the failings of the universe’s every protective branch, from law enforcement to legal and judicial systems.

III. Troublesome Manga Moment #1

In fiction as in reality, individuals react to abuse in different ways. Robin’s functionality in finding ways to survive, as well as rising to a high position within the Baroque Works, symbolizes her success against the demons of those experiences– but the retention of certain traumatized perceptions can also exist alongside those successes, often plaguing people who are otherwise “doing fine”

outwardly as self-esteem issues or mental illnesses like anxiety or depression (or those who must act as though they are fine when they are not, as women discontent with China's gender-expectations must have). The effects of abuse do not, however, often constitute the entirety of a person’s personality. A lesser storyteller might have fallen for this stereotype and allowed Robin’s issues to eclipse her entirely. Instead, Oda allows Robin’s troubled past to manifest subtly in her ability to maintain relationships as well as her inability to conjure hope, which critically affects the story and Robin’s emotional health in the Enies Lobby arc. Particularly present in Robin is a paranoia that she will never be safe or able to trust others implicitly again, expressed in the emotional distance she keeps from the Straw Hat crew upon her initial induction; it comes to the point that she is unwilling to refer to the characters by their names, instead nicknaming them based on their occupations or physical features. Instead, Oda allows Robin’s troubled past to manifest subtly in her ability to maintain relationships as well as her inability to conjure hope, which critically affects the story and Robin’s emotional health in the Enies Lobby arc. Particularly present in Robin is a paranoia that she will never be safe or able to trust others implicitly again, expressed in the emotional distance she keeps from the Straw Hat crew upon her initial induction; it comes to the point that she is unwilling to refer to the characters by their names, instead nicknaming them based on their occupations or physical features. Instead, Oda allows Robin’s troubled past to manifest subtly in her ability to maintain relationships as well as her inability to conjure hope, which critically affects the story and Robin’s emotional health in the Enies Lobby arc. Particularly present in Robin is a paranoia that she will never be safe or able to trust others implicitly again, expressed in the emotional distance she keeps from the Straw Hat crew upon her initial induction; it comes to the point that she is unwilling to refer to the characters by their names, instead nicknaming them based on their occupations or physical features. Instead, Oda allows Robin’s troubled past to manifest subtly in her ability to maintain relationships as well as her inability to conjure hope, which critically affects the story and Robin’s emotional health in the Enies Lobby arc. Particularly present in Robin is a paranoia that she will never be safe or able to trust others implicitly again, expressed in the emotional distance she keeps from the Straw Hat crew upon her initial induction; it comes to the point that she is unwilling to refer to the characters by their names, instead nicknaming them based on their occupations or physical features. Instead, Oda allows Robin’s troubled past to manifest subtly in her ability to maintain relationships as well as her inability to conjure hope, which critically affects the story and Robin’s emotional health in the Enies Lobby arc. Particularly present in Robin is a paranoia that she will never be safe or able to trust others implicitly again, expressed in the emotional distance she keeps from the Straw Hat crew upon her initial induction; it comes to the point that she is unwilling to refer to the characters by their names, instead nicknaming them based on their occupations or physical features.

Baumeister and Leary describe interpersonal attachments as “a fundamental human motivation,” and posit that a life lived alone is not something humans have evolutionarily selected for; we are, it would appear, meant to be social creatures. The dearth of positive social relations in her life would seem to inform Robin’s continual feelings of alienation and wariness, as seeking her own agenda and not being able to trust others have heretofore been a hallmark of her existence. In all, Robin’s coldness and very human emotions are realistically depicted and shown by the later revelation of her backstory to have been informed by personal reasoning. They are harmful and isolating, but they are well-reasoned, based on her knowledge of the world and the terrible hand dealt to her by fate. The Straw Hat Pirates eventually provide Robin the positive social motivation she requires to break from

her habits of compulsive self-preservation— but before that, there is the Enies Lobby Arc, and an unfortunate moment that undermines Robin’s perceived capabilities for self-control.

Robin leaves the crew at the beginning of this arc for two reasons: first, her aforementioned fear that the bonds she has built are about to be forcibly severed by others, and second, the Lobby has hunted her down and is threatening to use the Buster Call against her new friends if she resists arrest. She attempts to convince the crew that she is leaving of her own accord, but loyal Luffy and the others will hear none of it, and chase after the Lobby’s sea-going prison-transport train in a race to rescue Robin before she passes through the Gates of Justice in Enies Lobby (the Gates being a kind of point-of-no-return for arrested criminals). Yet when Ussop locates her, she initially refuses to leave with them. Her fear of government retaliation against the crew is great enough that she is willing to sacrifice herself for her friends’ safety.\(^{139}\) This would certainly throw gum in the crew’s plans— if they were willing to listen to her. When the majority of the crew finally reaches her, Sanji literally picks Robin up and *forcibly carries her* out of her prison car.\(^ {140} \) Now, a disclaimer: *One Piece* as a series does a remarkably good job at striking a balance between emotional and comic moments in a feel-good kind of way— but this scene was arguably a failure on the part of that formula. In it Robin, a woman, had made her own decision, but then found a man forcing her to act otherwise.

This is a situation women in our own world find themselves in every day, but with governmental and social forces limiting women’s ability to access birth control, abortion services, justice in the case of gendered crime, and even basic rights like free speech. *One Piece* avoids controversy here by basing the entire arc around Robin’s decision to turn herself in being based on a hopelessness informed by isolation, which the Straw Hats intend to show her she does not have to live with now that she has them to look out for her.\(^ {141} \) Arguably, trusting them *is* the right decision, which


\(^{140}\) Oda, *One Piece*, vol. 39, chapter 375.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., chapter 374.
we can see as readers and Robin realizes *ex post facto*. But how could she know that in the moment? This scene provides an unexpected look at how society perceives people in vulnerable psychological conditions— a label that is almost synonymous with many societies’ view of women until the last century. Not so recently, well-meaning ‘male logic’ about their bodies, intellectual abilities, and more was thrust upon them like a particularly unforgiving corset, the way Sanji well-meaningly heaved Robin up over his shoulder. Similarly, society forces expectations on the mentally-ill, handicapped, poor, and many other classes of person, making Robin a possible symbol for them and how they are often expected to be ‘fixed’ by efforts that, in reality, do very little to address their actual problems.

**IV: Representation #1: Mental Illness**

Looking at the social roles Robin was expected to fulfill, and how she failed due to psychological problems, brings us to the subject of how Chinese women are expected to deal with stress and the disorders it occasionally causes. While the opening-up of new opportunities emphasizes a regard for the intelligence and capability of females in modern China, stigma remains for those who cannot seamlessly adapt to the constant pressures of life— very much in line with the way women of old were expected to face demeaning treatment with stoicism, and were considered illogical and socially-deviant when they acted out. The stress Chinese women, migrants and college-students alike, face compared to Western women of the same age is often staggering to imagine: 14-hour workdays are not uncommon for laborers.\(^\text{142}\) The Chinese education system is legendarily competitive, featuring a high achievement standard, cram schools that run until late into the night, and multiple standardized examinations that determine a test-taker's possible occupations (and thus their future opportunities).\(^\text{143}\) China's rapid economic growth has placed pressure on workers at every tier in society to perform at the

\(^{142}\)Chang, *Factory Girls*, 57.

top of the international game, in an environment where adequate training, facilities, and services may not be available. Furthermore, while collectivism tends to enable the flow of group-work much better than in individualistic cultures, the Chinese perception of respect for superiors, informed by Confucian hierarchy, creates boundaries between workers according to their rank within a company; with unemployment as high as ten percent in urban areas, quitting a difficult job no matter your level of dissatisfaction is a dangerous gamble\textsuperscript{144}. If you've ever attempted to cross the street in Beijing, you have some idea of how frenetic and stressful a Chinese worker's life can be. And that's before the cultural stigmas about the implicit “failure” of mental illness are factored in.

In the realm of mental illness and stress-management, modern Chinese women (and men) face a system wherein mental illness and its causes are still to some degree imperfectly understood, which creates tensions amid the laudable cultural institution of the familial support network. Ji Jianlin found that the family remains the first level of support for mentally-ill patients after release from the healthcare system, providing further evidence that the primary support network for individuals in China is meant to be a close-knit family where every member has a role to play.\textsuperscript{145} This societal interdependence, forwarded by Confucianism and collectivism, however, makes standing out due to an illness implicitly more difficult for a sick individual. When a person becomes non-functional or develops visible symptoms of a mental illness, such as depression or crippling anxiety, it constitutes a “failure” on their part to hold up their filial or social role; a filial son with depression, for example, still has the obligation to work the long days that are draining his will to live in order to support his elderly parents and family. As a part of an ecosystem where every role supports another, a mentally-ill person's inability to function affects not only themselves but \textit{others}-- which in the \textit{guanxi} reciprocal-model likely means scrambling to make up to everyone whom you've caused trouble. But often this is beyond


\textsuperscript{145}Jianlin, “Advances in Mental Health Services”, 91.
the ability of an incapacitated person, creating a feedback loop of dislike and isolation from others that engenders dislike of the self for “failing” their relations and coworkers.

Resentment of a mental patient's “failure” within the social ecosystem is documented in Keung-Wong et. al's study of caregivers and their perceptions of the cause of mental illness in their charges.\textsuperscript{146} It is, however, important to remember that Keung-Wong et. al's research was undertaken largely in urban areas, meaning that these ideas have persisted even in the 'cosmopolitan' areas we typically associate with rapid dissemination of knowledge– and that in rural areas where the spread of ideas is hampered by distance and entrenched tradition, campaigns of public education are even more necessary. As the group found, the religio-cosmological view of illness being a punishment for past or familial wrongs and element-imbalance is, happily, on the way out, as cultural change and education bring concepts of individualism and biological medicine to places where collectivism and folk-medicine were once the only schema through which mental illness could be understood.\textsuperscript{147} An important cultural connotation of this view is the move away from familial or group-based causes of mental illness (sins of the past, improper feng shui/element balance/ancestor worship, etc.) to a more individualized perception of illness ('personality defects', brain chemistry, etc.), crystallizing a moment of socio-cultural change brought on by the knowledge and cultural exchange of global- and modernization.\textsuperscript{148} But with a closer look, we can still surmise that the rising, individualistic “psychosocial and personality perspective” is equally problematic, as it places the blame for illness upon the shoulders of the sick for not choosing a personality that better copes with stress; caregivers saw symptoms such as depressive's introvertedness as personality issues, and resent them for not adapting to stress by changing their personalities to more extroverted ones\textsuperscript{149}.

\textsuperscript{147}Keung-Wong, “Changing Health Beliefs”, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{148}Ibid., 88, 95.
\textsuperscript{149}Ibid., 88.
While caregivers do understand the connection between stress and illness, most cannot help viewing illness through the cultural lens of being a deviation from the social norm; difference can be frightening and uncomfortable anywhere, and so alienation and negative feelings towards the sufferer is inevitable when they do not “choose” to handle stress better. Unfortunately, this fairly-universal reaction makes it seem, to the sufferer, that they themselves and not the illness are causing these reactions; unable to get past how much they are negatively affecting others and obligated by guanxi to salvage personal networks by making visible individual efforts, they are pitted directly against their illness each day and inevitably lose. Further exacerbating this feedback loop, sufferers and caregivers who believe in the psychosocial-personality system may hold out on seeking professional help, respectively desperate to make up for their “mistakes” themselves or out of the belief that convincing the sufferer to choose a more capable personality will fix the problem. This belief-system seems to me to be the confluence of education and existing beliefs about culpability being a large part of sickness, which produces a system that incorporates responsibility as well as intangible creators of illness (stress). Without downplaying the great sacrifices Chinese caregivers make in caring for sick family members, widespread social education about mental illness' real causes would help with this blame cycle and alleviate stress on both sides of the caregiver-patient relationship.

The pressure to “suck it up and get back to being normal” that Chinese (and indeed global) mental-health sufferers face is mirrored in the Straw Hat Pirates' treatment of Robin's depressed outlook, as (besides Ussop), they expect her to personally defeat her “noonday-demon” seemingly because they, a relatively new force in her life, want her to conform to the roles of “friend” and “crewmate.” In effect, Robin feels the same weight— and disappointment in those around her— when she cannot perform according their desires. What Robin highlights for us (in both fiction and the real

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150 Ibid., 94-95.
151 Ibid., 88.
152 Ibid., 98.
world) is that an entire worldview doesn’t just radically change in two months (or two serialized chapter). One cannot ethically or scientifically make a person suffering from clinical fears or emotional disturbance suddenly reverse their mindset by removing them from one place to another. And as emotions are seen as primarily the domain of women, there’s a connection here to the atavistic mindset that a woman cannot make logical decisions about the world around her, as she is under sway of hormones that affect her mood and thus her perception (Robin’s self-informed decision-making replacing estrogen, in this metaphor). Yet Robin is eminently logical in her fears, basing them on a lifetime of people being unable to protect her; she is willing to face a perversion of justice and possibly be executed, to protect the people who gave her a silver of hope. But the entire story subtly frames Robin’s decision as merely giving up; that she’s so entrenched in wrongness that she cannot be convinced to think otherwise and must then be forced. This simplistic model turns all of the Straw Hat pirates into heroes for being such good friends, even if their intervention is poorly-done. Having Sanji, a slightly perverted character, top Ussop’s measured, calming speeches to Robin as a human being by taking control of her physical mobility is almost offensive in its lack of understanding. The gesture would be so even if it was fellow female Nami doing the lifting, due to even someone you see as illogical having a right to their own person and choices. One Piece took a beautiful teaching-moment about human nature and added a comic element that translates into the worst gesture of control you can force on a hurting person.

All of this makes Robin’s eventual, emotion-filled scream from the brink of the Gates of Justice that she wants to live, to the point that she hangs onto a cliff by her teeth in trust that her friends will rescue her,\textsuperscript{153} much more meaningful than a kidnapping and “We Told You So” lecture after the fact: Robin chooses to carry on in spite of her trauma and psychic burden and attempt to recapture the life she hasn’t been allowed to live. She’s rewarded for her bravery with a home, friends, a second chance

\textsuperscript{153}Oda, \textit{One Piece}, vol. 41, chapter 398.
to write her own life’s story, and has become an well-loved allegory for success in the eyes of countless
fans, for it.

V. Troublesome Manga Moment #2

Robin had great worth and depth of character, but suffered from initially poor depiction of her will. Already reeling from this insult, however, the addition of sexualization undermines what was left of Robin as a serious character. As a fighter, Robin has many victories under her belt and helps carry battle-based arcs. She’s shown to be a more-than-capable fighter— a currency worth it’s weight in gold in the “Battle Economy” of *shonen* series, where screentime and popularity are determined primarily by the combat presence of a character. This makes it doubly tragic that Robin's physical appearance did not enjoy the renaissance that Nami’s early designs did, and that sexual amplification was thus allowed to undermine her character sooner. Nico Robin and her H-cup bust\(^154\) would, in real life, likely fit into the group of women who experience thoracic spine, back, or chest wall pain,\(^155\) especially given her small waist (her measurements, cited by the creator, are B103-W60-H90, in centimeters.)\(^156\) In real life, Robin would probably be a prime candidate for breast-reduction surgery.\(^157\) But it's hardly the size of her breasts that matters; it’s that those breasts are being inflated due to a kind of “more flesh, more appeal” mentality that is, again, aimed mostly at male readers. How do we know it’s a ploy? The aforementioned “Sailing Dreams” blog post authored by Amanda Wolfe spends most of its bulk addressing a depiction of Robin in chapter 699 as little more than a delicious piece of eye candy, but also perverts one of Robin’s most positive social developments.\(^158\)

In this chapter, Robin tasks herself with helping a child temporarily taken up by the crew,

\(^154\)*Bra Size Calculator,* [Sizeguide](http://www.sizeguide.net/bra-sizes.html).


\(^156\)Oda, *One Piece*, vol. 69, supplemental materials (not available in all publications of the novel).


\(^158\)Wolfe, “A Troubled Reaction.”
Momonosuke, to take a bath. This is hardly out of the ordinary in Japanese bathing tradition, as we have previously acknowledged. Just as a Western parent might linger in the bathroom to wash their child’s back or sit at the tubside and amuse them, Robin’s presence in the communal bath with Momonosuke is a completely maternal gesture on her part, though the spacial considerations of helping someone in a Japanese-style bath actually require her to disrobe and enter the space with him. Momonosuke, at eight, might be considered a little old to need much help with hygiene- but he has also been freshly taken from a situation where he faced brutality, confinement, and near starvation that causes him to hallucinate, a situation in which any child could arguably use some adult assistance. As a survivor of abuse herself, Robin knows what he’s gone through and is obviously attempting to reach out to the boy. From her tone of voice and motherly cradling of the boy after he falls asleep post-bath, there is absolutely no evidence that anything abusive is going on at Robin’s end of the action.

Momonosuke, however, is another story: against the backdrop of the male crew members lusting among themselves, Momonosuke feigns sleep so Robin will hold him against her. He later winks to acknowledge the rest of the jealous crew. While the scene obviously has some comedic basis in Japan, to Westerners such a scene will likely seem out of place and perverted. In a bulletin on age-proper sexual behavior, The Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress cites that healthy eight year-olds should be entering a stage where their sexual curiosity is tempered by knowledge of social rules, and a privatization of sexual conduct in acknowledgment of them.

According to this medical bulletin, it is inappropriate (and possibly unhealthy) for even an eight year-old in a fantasy series, for example, to consciously use his age to manipulate his way into situations where women disrobe; nor should he express triumph over his “conquest” in public. And for grown

males to *openly express jealousy that a child ‘beat them’ to seeing a woman naked.*\(^{161}\) There’s so much wrong with this scene, it’s hard to know what to address first:

1. Momonosuke's precocious, even predatory, sexuality is being inflated for comedic purposes, and implies that excessive exposure to patriarchal values has already begun to fashion his self-esteem as a contest to be more “manly” than other boys/men.

2. The male crew members’ reaction to Momonosuke as competition only encourages more behavior like this by creating a climate wherein sexuality becomes a competition among males of *every age*. And it’s not a protective instinct toward the women they’re expressing, either: they are genuinely jealous of Momonosuke, and when he reveals to them, with a wink, his deliberate manipulation of Nami and Robin, they fall down and call him their hero!

3. The divide between a woman nurturing and a woman appeasing male sexuality is deliberately, maliciously blurred here, so that Robin and Nami’s gestures are seen for their *sexual* rather than maternal value. It completely invalidates the two and their actions, reducing them to the barest symbols of their value to the male audience: their femininity, symbolized by the breasts made manifestly focus, through the chapter's 'male gaze' angles and drawing, as sexual objects.

4. Robin and Nami have, critically, not engaged their male crewmates romantically in the first place, meaning that the men are acting out of *their own perception of entitlement* to the females’ bodies. They have no right to feel jealous, because Nami and Robin’s bodies are not their property to protect or view at their leisure.

5. Furthermore, Nami and Robin are represented as passive victims of Momonosuke’s sexuality, hoodwinked by their own maternal instincts to allow him into their ‘sanctum’, where they become unwitting objects of a man’s malicious intentions. Their humanistic gestures are thus relabeled as “asking for it”, rather than character-developing compassion for a vulnerable child-

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\(^{161}\) Oda, *One Piece*, vol. 70, chapter 699.
figure. This is an immensely harmful perversion of not just maternal instinct, but human compassion- which, by the way, is not a gender-limited course of action. A little kindness toward Momonosuke would not in fact damage the Straw Hat guys’ masculinity— but it’s certainly framed that way by the writers, who turn him from an innocent into the guys’ worst “enemy.”

Disturbing content and comedic (yes, comedic) intentions aside, Robin’s obvious intelligence and equality to the other crew members in the currency of physical strength make this chapter all more insulting to her as a character; for all her obvious positive qualities, this chapter says, throwaway boob jokes are apparently all she is really good for. But male readers are also being objectified in this unfortunate snafu of a storyline: this chapter is just one example of the entire male race being reduced to a kind of statistics-group that is guaranteed to be entranced by even senseless displays of sexuality. That mentality is not, mind you, the creation of Oda or one person in particular; it’s a completely unfair truncation of a complex concept, dreamed up by media and commercial enterprises, who rely on culture and patriarchal entitlement of males to prop up their shoddy, squicky generalizations about sexuality. Chapter like this only help fuel those mentalities, until society reinforces lust as the primary definition of masculinity, thereby encouraging chauvanistic and sexist behavior as public assertions of male identity at the cost of female rights to safety and comfort. Women consuming this chapter are reminded that their bodies trump any action or skill in how the world views them, in the end— and men are told that their sexual desire will be catered to in One Piece at the expense of plot, reason, or anything else. Worse, as 'hip' foreign influence, these ideas are transferred to a younger generation who is still forming gender schema, where nonsensical lust is made out to be the 'global' purpose of female bodies— and that's even more disturbing than the content of chapter 699, in my opinion.
VI: Representation #2: Westernized Beauty Ideals

A small success must be acknowledged in the (possibly unintentional) creation of a heroic female character of color. As a child in the *anime*, Robin is shown to have dark tan skin, black hair, and black eyes, making her appear similar to Pacific Islanders in ethnicity. Despite the obvious amount of islands the series features, not all inhabitants of them are created equal: Nami grew up on Cocoyasi Island, known for its tangerine orchards, but has a lily-white complexion. The only other crew member who is clearly of color is Ussop, making Robin a valuable diversifying factor for the team. Since *manga* and *anime* often take place in fantasy universes or cultures that combine Western and Japanese living arrangements and need to create visibly-unique characters, there is a tendency among artists to depict most characters as members of a kind of “raceless” race where everyone is white to light-tan in skin shade and hair can come in all colors of the rainbow.\(^{162}\) The ethnic homogeneity of Japan as a nation probably informs this equalizing of skintone, and has deep historical roots; before the return of Western traders in the 1800's, following a long period of isolationism, the nation had little to contact with people of other colors. Continued racial homogeneity creates little need to represent other races respectfully in media, since vocal minorities within the country are unlikely to exist or be influential.\(^{163}\)

Unfortunately, body-image trends that include paleness as a feature of beauty may have impinged on Robin’s ability to provide darker-complexioned girls with a role model of their color. In fact, Robin's skin tone seems to be an accidental *anime* invention in the first place; in colored panels of the *manga*, Robin is often depicted as sharing the same skin-tone as her fellow crewmates (save Ussop, who is African-American).\(^{164}\) The fact that Robin was arguably never intended to be a heroine of color

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came to a head following One Piece's two-year plot timeskip. Robin came back much whiter than she had been, leading to questions and bristling Tumblr discussions between English-speaking fans. It could have been a mere color palette error– until it happened three times. This suggests that among animators for the anime (which is relatively independent of the manga), there may be a fear of a respectable character like Robin appearing "too colored" to be considered optimally pretty anymore, among overwhelming tides of Western appearance being seen as the ideal for beauty in a globalizing world.

Paleness has a long, anecdotal history of being desirable in many cultures, as it implied that the lady did not have to toil in the fields and was therefore rich and respectable – but the movement of ideas in a globalized world has brought a glamorous perception of "Westernized beauty" with it, which places a particular pressure on naturally-tan girls and women. In Beijing today, the beauty sections of stores overflow with creams and body-washes designed to bleach the skin. Western models in expensive clothing populate now-ubiquitous fashion magazines and advertisements, and appearance-based consumerism skips hand-in-hand with China's rising middle-class, as well as its increased trade in luxury products and global imports (not to mention ideas about the social worth of those who can afford such baubles!)

This non-native beauty trend for paleness has also been imported, ironically, alongside Western processed food, which has a notorious effect on both the waistline and may challenge additional, imported norms of slenderness as a desirable trait in women. As a dangerously-thin-waisted and large-breasted woman, Robin is one of many One Piece females who could be considered to advocating unrealistic body standards. In America, soaring rates of obesity have created a craze of weight-anxiety

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165 The timeskip occurs between episodes 516-517 and chapter 597-598, and lasts around two years.
168 Sribhibadh, “Westernized Standard of Beauty?”
among women largely exposed to only thinness as a media standard of beauty; with China's equal
growth in obesity rates\textsuperscript{169} and similar exposure to Western media, we can reasonably expect more of the
same trend of body-anxiety– and the birth of a market for weight-loss supplements, health food, and so
forth among Chinese women. But while a fixation on thinness is newly arriving, cultural values of old
meeting the new availability of cosmetic fixation has had other effects on Chinese womens' collective
body-image crisis: a booming plastic surgery industry has popularized, besides eyelid alteration and
other minor procedures, life-altering and entirely-cosmetic “heightening surgeries”, where the legs are
purposefully broken and set with pins that twist to “stretch” the bones. Height has traditionally been
valued in China, and while this procedure makes up a very small number of total surgeries, the push to
alter womens' bodies is clearly on the rise once more. Going to such extremes as skin-bleaching and
major surgery would not seem worth the expense and danger if a significant social pressure for women
to conform did not exist. One height-surgeon said he had met patients so distressed by the 'flaw' of
shortness that they were considering suicide, and others left their entire social-support networks behind
to undergo year-long treatments.\textsuperscript{170}

Underregulated, discriminatory hiring practices, often decided by male bosses, favor the tall and
the beautiful\textsuperscript{171}– and in China's high-achievement culture, undergoing “body enhancing” procedures is
an expensive gamble with a potentially high pay-out: you are that much closer to looking like the
hegemonic “typical” white woman, which (obstensibly) translates into social acceptance and more
potential to succeed in a discriminatory job market. It is truly an obscene amount of pressure to put on
women, in asking them to submit their physical selves and body-image to a system that provides them
the education to do anything and then denies opportunities to them based on their appearance. One

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{171}Hopkins, "Western Cosmetics in the Gendered Development," 292.
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might even say, as Chinese feminists have,\textsuperscript{172} that commercialism and unregulated appearance-discrimination hearken back to the days of bound feet and forced seclusion, but with a patriarchal market rather than a patriarchal society telling women what to do with their bodies. Robin has someone to recolor her- but will Chinese girls choose surgery, skin-bleach, or settle for self-loathing, as a norm of beauty that doesn't belong to them settles over their country?

\textbf{VII: Conclusions}

Like Nami before her, Nico Robin had an incredible amount of potential: as an allegory, a female, an ethnic character, and a combatant. Only the first and the last of these potentialities have been fulfilled, in my estimation– but that’s still saying quite a bit about the character. Robin has been ‘allowed’ to transcend stereotypes about her gender and become a rare female hero equal in power to male ones in her series. She also balances that with a healthy depiction of how human nature works out and ultimately conquers trauma, without descending into cheap, gendered archetypes of how “emotive females” handle powerful feelings. She is, in my mind, the most successful and personable female character in \textit{One Piece}– if you can see her, that is, around those patriarchally-inflated breasts.

\textsuperscript{172}Ibid., 291.
Character Study 3: Boa Hancock

The Princess and the Patriarchy

I: Character Introduction

“Seeing every man (except Luffy) as an enemy, Hancock indiscriminately attacks both marines and pirates during the war.”

This is an actual quote from Boa Hancock’s page on the One Piece fan-wiki. It’s also an excellent introduction to the oversimplification of many concepts, including complex psychological ones, which are endemic to Hancock's storyline. This is especially tragic because it indicates that the series turned its potentially most interesting, politically-mighty female— and thus best possible role model for female readers— into a vapid, stereotype-riddled travesty.

Snake Princess and “Pirate Empress” of the Kuja tribe, Boa Hancock has everything that would make her a great leader: first-hand knowledge of suffering that will prevent her from disregarding her lowest subjects; great physical prowess; good looks; cheek; a supernatural affinity to an animal familiar (can’t hurt); and a place among the Shichibukai. But there’s one flaw in this recipe for success, and it has to do with her gender's perceived sexuality: Hancock falls hopelessly in love with Luffy during the Amazon Lily arc, and continually demotes herself in both the roles she plays and her own ability to change the world in which she lives. Despite the Shichibukai’s evil ties, Hancock could have created a movement for change from within by displaying greater power than her fellow members— but that would, it seems, be too clever for a woman to accomplish without having a man be the impetus for her actions. One Piece tries to frame this “love story” as a gesture of her “coming over” from a dark inner

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174The seven-pirate oligarchy which heads the World Government, previously discussed in the Nico Robin character study.
place. They try, and they fail miserably, turning Boa Hancock into a great mush of uninspired, immensely-sexist contrivances. Boa Hancock has, in my mind, suffered the worst portrayal of any woman in the series: her humanity and potential relatability have been completely replaced by poorly-written stereotypes about both women and abuse victims. Confusing, convoluted, and ultimately put out to pasture as the main character's long-suffering one-sided love interest, Boa Hancock is one of the worst depictions of femininity I've ever encountered. She is no feminist heroine, and the strength she could have loaned to the cause is completely squandered

II. Backstory/Motivations

Boa Hancock is the most humanoid of the three Gorgon sisters, royal blood of the Kuja tribe. When Hancock was twelve, she and her sisters happened to be aboard a ship that was captured by slavers; the girls were then sold to the Tenryubito, the distant relatives of the original establishers of the World Government, who are known for being great abusers of those who occupy lower castes than their own. The girls faced unnamed horrors during this period of captivity on the Tenryubito's personal island of Mariejois, which Boa arguably suffered the worst share of: she was force-fed a Devil Fruit which gave her the ability to turn those who looked on her with lust or impure thoughts to stone.

This act of ‘torture’ makes little sense at first, given that providing an object of victimization with the means to fight back against potential assailters is the opposite of what rapists and captors generally do in their quest for control over a victim.\(^{175}\) Since little enumeration is offered as to the specifics of what precisely went on in Mariejois, some amount of inference is required on our parts to understand what exactly happened to Hancock and her sisters. The kidnapping is supposedly the first time Hancock or her Amazon-dwelling sisters have seen a man, which means any abuse would be completely confusing and without schema for them to interpret the experience through. As an adult,

Hancock speaks at length on the concept of shame and goes to great lengths to hide the manipulative, sensual nature of her ability;\textsuperscript{176} coupled with her apparent distrust of men, it appears that gendered violence (rape) as well as mental and emotional abuse were implemented on Hancock or her sisters, to make her so ashamed of the experience. It’s also possible that Hancock was only given the Devil Fruit after she had been so brutalized and mentally beaten-down by enslavement that she was literally seen by the Tenryubito as incapable of fighting back. A mere child facing so much trauma, Hancock probably would have felt so defeated at this point as to consider it herself just that.

The Devil Fruit’s power would have meant that attempting to petrify everyone who approached her was the only way to protect herself and her sisters from potential assailants, making Hancock hyper-alert and distrustful of others—especially men, who are a kind of alien creature within Amazon Lily's entirely-female culture. At some point in her captivity, she was also branded with the mark of the Tenryubito: a hoof-shaped scar that she still bears. To have an experience that horrendous forever stamped, unforgettable, on her very flesh is a lingering act of sadism that Hancock takes great pains to keep covered from even her own subjects,\textsuperscript{177} along with the origin of her powers. This is probably because in the uninformed minds of her subjects, a “sullied” woman would seem unfit as a ruler, if she could be subdued by the likes of a lowly, culturally-despised male. She might be shamed for not fighting back with Amazonian tenacity, with little consideration paid to her age or ability at the time to do so; facts might fall by the wayside, replaced by cold judgment and the loss of her status as a respectable Amazon. How can we surmise such an Amazonian reaction? By looking at how modern Chinese rape victims are treated within their respective culture.

\textsuperscript{176}Eiichirō Oda, \textit{One Piece} (vol. 53), trans. Lance Caselman and Taylor Eagle (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2010), chapter 515.

\textsuperscript{177}Oda, \textit{One Piece}, vol. 53, chapter 515.
III. Representation #1: Rape Victims

In China, social perceptions of rape largely resonate along similar lines of misinformation about the capability of survivors—some of which have translated into poor legislation, and all of which place particular weight on the shoulders of rape victims. The nature of rape as a crime, for example, is arguably not yet fully understood on an official level as an act of imposed control, as China's fumblings to recognize child-rape and failure to include marital-rape in their legal “Explanation” dictum reveal. Rape in China remains an innately gendered act because of where morality meets culture; when we consider Qing-dynasty legal definitions of the crime, we find that the deviance of rape was primarily the theft of a woman's chastity, and that any perceived failure to protect this chastity often cast doubt on a woman's claims that she was violated. “Did you fight back the whole time?” becomes a problematic legal definition the world over when we consider a woman's real ability to fight back if she has been pinned down or drugged, as well as whose testimony is truly being considered. In a patriarchal society, the input and social value of males is supported through the very mechanisms of society and those institutions' control over women. When societal judge and jury are all male or male-defined, are we really to believe that patriarchy is an unbiased judge of testimony when gender causes stories to differ? Who stops the uninformed from hissing, even after the assailant has been jailed, “She asked for it because she was out after dark, wearing a short skirt”?

Chinese rape law has been criticized for its failure to provide specifics upon which litigation can be built, even following modern revisions. Most recently, this vagueness led to international pressure for China to rewrite a section of juvenile rape-law that created a loophole where claims of ignorance of a victim's age might set a perpetrator free, as well as failing to adequately protect male victims of

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179 Tanner, “Rape Law,” 1.
180 Ibid., 3.
rape. We can hence accuse Chinese rape law of being unclear at best, and inadequate in the case of scenarios where questions not answered by the law invite the speculation of male judges in a patriarchal system, which could significantly alter the judgments being handed down. Additionally, many feel that China approaches rape as a 'sickness' on the part of the assaulter rather than the socialization of men to force dominance on women. By focusing on censorship at a government level, China avoids having to study whether its historically-gendered practices have anything to do with male perceptions of dominance. By painting rapists as deviants, and often depicting them solely as members of the uneducated underclass, they ignore the possibility that rape is more than a class-based crime, and continue to paint women as victims from whom chastity, a vaunted virtue, has been stolen, rather than a vocal political group. But just as problematic is the fact that by and large, social perceptions lag behind legal definitions of criminality and wrongdoing.

In a culture that still largely defines sexuality through the concept of heterosexual union, the “immoral” nature of pre-marital sex still colors perceptions about the proclivities of those who engage in it— to disastrous effect. In collectivist cultures, which survive socially even within China's biggest cities, a unique worry is imparted to young women about their sexuality being badly perceived by others and the “loss of face” associated— exactly reflecting Hancock's struggle to hide her own rape and origin of her abilities, which were gained during the kidnapping in which rape took place. In a study of Chinese and Japanese students, J. Farrer et al. found that young Chinese women tended to hold out on having sex out of fear of making “mistakes” for which they would be judged. A preoccupation with buyao zuoren, or being “unable to hold one's head up” due to a sexual dalliance was on a list of

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182Tanner, “Chinese Rape Law in Comparative Perspective,” 18.
183Ibid., 12.
conservative sexual practices I believe to be informed by how Chinese women are gender-socialized within a system that places the “blame” for sex on their shoulders. This way of thinking, proven among modern Chinese girls, echoes the shame-mentality supported by Chinese law's failures to consider forced sex as an act of dominance rather than a moral deviance; girls feel responsible for what others will think of their family honor as well as damage to their personal 'face', and may deny themselves sexual liberty in order to stay free of criticism. Within this context of female responsibility and the weight of judgment women are expected to face for said choices, forced sex does not manage to fall outside the responsibility continuum. Instead, it brings just as much shame— and sometimes even more— than sex freely chosen! Tsun-Yin Luo's study of urban rape survivors, “Marrying My Rapist”, reveals that feelings of being “tainted” bring on self-derogation and feelings of inadequacy in victims, who may then be assaulted with negative remarks and implications by others. Victims are blamed and shamed by those that they trust, and feel they have dishonored their families; rapists tell them that their “frigidity” has forced his hand, and that if he had been given sex “when I asked politely”, the assault would not have been necessary. One victim's mother would wash her laundry separately from the rest of the family's, disinfect every utensil she ate with, and monitored her phone and daily activities in response to an assault that she obviously felt had sullied her child irreparably. Others are thrown out on the streets, for shaming the family.185

None of these harmful, victim-blaming perceptions, of course, developed in a vacuum: they are the direct result of cultural and historical narratives about crimes against women, which are in turn strengthened in the absence of rhetoric from authorities that contradicts such notions. A lack of education on the part of victims, who are made vulnerable by low socioeconomic positions, may in fact, as Chinese officials hold, be a component of rape— but it is a lack of knowledge at large and antiquated beliefs uncontested by an patriarchally-minded Party, rather than the poor education of one

group, that has scripted the experience of Chinese rape victims. Until the Party or activist groups manage to nationally address such failings of knowledge, Boa Hancock will continue to indirectly represent a demographic of suffering females.

IV: Troublesome Manga Moment #1

So how does *One Piece* handle depicting a character who brings up such weighty issues? In a word, poorly. The real insult is not only that her backstory is only shoddily explained, or that Boa is, shortly after her introduction, happened upon by Luffy while she is naked in the bath; it's that every aspect of Hancock—her tribe, her political decisions, and even her emotional development—oozes with sexist generalizations, which are often played up for comedy. To substantiate my observation, one can look at the place Boa comes from: the island of Amazon Lily, which men are forbidden to enter: Luffy is brought there because his rescuers, women of the city, have no concept of how a man is different from a woman because they have never seen one. The ‘hilarity’ increases when Luffy, locked in a public cage and awakening stripped naked, is asked by a gathered crowd of female onlookers to explain his genitalia. Luffy responds that they are his *kintama*, the Japanese word for ‘testicles’ that literally means ‘golden eggs’. The surrounding Amazons take this literally, and stretch out their hands to ask if they might handle what they perceive to be ornamental ‘balls’ made of pure gold.¹⁸⁶

Even in an isolated jungle kingdom, this kind of ignorance is unlikely to exist. The guards who find Luffy, first of all, should have some idea of what they’re keeping away from their famously all-female settlement; surely Hancock, traumatized by men, has told them what to look out for. Second, even if men exist as a kind of urban-legend type of boggart in Amazon Lily, the biological determinants of outward gender appearance are likely to be the first identifiers of such that an Amazonian arrow-

slinger will notice. Third, a misunderstanding where dozens of women attempt to palpate the reproductive organs of a protagonist is downright sexist and pandering; more of it occurs as Luffy attempts to escape the island’s hardliners who want to kill him on sight, as he bounces off breasts and kidnaps one Amazon to question. This girl is stunned at his rubber-body abilities, thanks him for saving her from falling (when he caused them to fall in the first place?), and then asks to touch the kintama when Luffy asks if he can repay her for helping him. Amazon Lily, clearly, is not a place where sense prevails: it’s a place for readers to flog a private fetish for innocent, doe-eyed women in jungle costumes who like to palpate male genitals. As shonen becomes a more gender-neutral genre, we must wonder when the incentive to keep adding illogical, male-centric moments like this will wear out. Is offending half of the really worth it? Can that half of the demographic even speak up, in an international market that is largely unable to change Japanese cultural trends (and who already buy into the fan-service and pornography enough that manga has become a global market)?

V. Troublesome Manga Moment #2:

Boa Hancock is first introduced to the series in an off-hand comment about her legendary beauty in chapter 489. In her actual appearance, however, Hancock storms a pirate ship and causes an entire crew’s worth of men to hand over their treasure while mincing soppishly with hearts for eyes. Here we see Hancock’s Devil Fruit ability first manifest, during which time they properly meet one of the many stereotypes she embodies. Relabeled the “Love Love Beam” in the English dub by 4Kids Productions, Hancock’s powers allow her to first draw in opponents with the Devil Fruit's ability to cause/aggravate love or lust (translation discrepancies make it difficult to tell which one was intended), and then to turn them to stone if she so chooses—sometimes unconsciously, for comic effect. The

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188Ibid.
The ability of a woman to influence male actions through sexuality is an age-old fear, especially potent in patriarchal orders where dominance over women is utilized as a form of social control. Male anxiety over it is thought to have inspired supernatural entities like the Succubus and Imp, who preyed on men during their sleep (and conveniently explained sinful masturbatory stains on the sheets).  

In modern story-telling, the “Evil Demon Seductress” trope consists of female characters who weaponize their sexuality, often for use against male characters and for their own gains. Black widow spiders and praying mantises have become the totem animals of this cliché due to their habits of consuming mates after coital activity, because it fits with the expected behavior of women herein. Hancock’s ability ranks as Evil Demon Seductress-tier in that it manipulates the mind of admirers—even female ones, though males are overwhelmingly shown falling under the sway of her power.

It’s here that we run into the first major contradiction in Hancock’s character: far from being sensitive as to the enslavement she forces on others, Hancock has no qualms about using this “shameful” ability to get what she wants. If she only enslaved males, then this could be considered an action prompted by a desire for vengeance—but using the Mero Mero freely, blithely, implies a corruption in Hancock’s character and a lack of introspection that is neither intelligent or logical. Granted, people regardless of gender can be unintelligent and illogical—but there’s still no explanation given for why the otherwise clever Hancock would not at least consider the morality of enslavement when she herself knows the experience. The former-victim has risen up and become inexplicably evil—and that in turn calls up the image of the unforgiving, senseless-murdering tendencies of the black-widow, or the cruelty of the

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190 Wikia contributors, “Boa Hancock.”
192 #4 The Evil Demon Seductress (Tropes vs. Women),” YouTube video, 3:41, by FeministFrequency, May 23, 2011,
http://youtu.be/-VeCjm1UO4M.
praying mantis. In summation, Hancock is not a logical entity; she is merely a stereotype.

This brings us to the second contradiction in Boa Hancock as a character: man-hate. A popular motivation of the aforementioned Evil Demon Seductresses, blind hatred towards males has been popularized as an easy explanation for why feminists make the “trouble” they do about Bechdel tests and equal wages: they just don’t like men and want to antagonize them. With typical insensitivity to the complexity of healing, this cliché is sometimes written into the motivations of characters who have survived assault or abuse. But people change, especially when new stimuli (Luffy) interrupt a schema (man-hate). Where does the fear end, and the love of Luffy and hatred for his enemies begin?

Hancock's selective and poorly-explained man-hate appears to be merely the sum of contrivances about trauma that miraculously support the main plot– which leaves unfortunate gaps in our ability to reach an understanding of what exactly is going on in Hancock's head. This reaction is further complicated when we see her immediately apply her miraculously cured mind to organizing her extensive forces and political clout to support Luffy's agenda of becoming King of the Pirates. Even if we acknowledge that her rebellion against the Shichibukai seemed not to be motivated by any real strategy before, but rather out of a general sense of pointless, almost teenager-esque rebellion, Hancock's goals have heretofore been self-formed and self-protective; it's rather strange, then, to see her hand over the reins of power to an agenda not her own. Hancock engages in many acts which show that she now apparently cares more for Luffy than her own well-being or that of her kingdom: she commands her armies for his cause despite eminent threat to Amazon Lily by the remaining six Shichibukai and their military forces; in the Marineford Arc, she returns to the site of her imprisonment and torture at Luffy's bequest and seems blissful rather than perturbed, as most victims of a crime would be; Hancock even enters the fray of battle in complete disregard for her status as a sovereign

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194 Oda, One Piece, vol. 53, chapter 517.
and a leader, and stands down the cross-hairs of a weapon that she knows would blow them both to pieces, merely for the gesture of shielding Luffy's prone form. These are not the actions of a thoughtful and self-motivated leader of women, but of someone who has handed their capability over to a lame, absolutist mandate: anything for my man! But the culture working on Boa Hancock is the primarily-patriarchal one of One Piece's author, and she benefits from no such dual expectations that she should be capable as well as female. Hancock additionally provides a roosting-place for generalizations of females as flighty and appearance-fixated, because great length goes into explaining her appearance as justification for nearly anything she does. In one of the reader’s first encounters with her, she flaunts her ability to get away with mutilating kittens and slaughtering innocents because her beauty means she will be instantly forgiven. We’re quickly shown that Boa has many devoted, soppish suitors of both genders willing to just this; her subjects love her, and even servants she’s just petrified forgive her instantly for turning them to stone.

The healing process following assault is complex and extremely individual, of course— but in Hancock's case it is completely truncated, as she adheres entirely and suddenly to a male who is completely unwilling to return her affections and never shows any romantic interest in her, yet immediately finds “purpose” in her role of supporting him. At best, her relationship with Luffy is at present unhealthy, but might instigate future personal growth for the emotionally-stunted empress; at worst, it is an excuse to speedily “fix” the troublesome confusion of emotions she faces as a victim, and underscore a twisted loyalty to a main character she should, by rule, despise. This sad version of unrequited love makes Hancock do some silly, desperate things: she delightedly keeps a count of how many times Luffy has said her name correctly, and threatens allies who prevent her from getting to see

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197 Oda, One Piece, vol. 53, chapter 517.
199 Ibid
Luffy\textsuperscript{200}, not to mention her supporting the underdog in a political war that threatens her homeland– an action she might not have undertake if she weren't in love with its ringleader. It is always possible that Hancock, spoiled, isolated, and emotionally immature, has no idea how to act in a socially-acceptable manner when it comes to affection– but the expectation of returned affection should at least be a rational consideration when one pursues a relationship, especially when pursuing it involves sending out ships and soldiers. Chasing Luffy when he is openly uninterested\textsuperscript{201} and possibly detrimental to her political agenda is not the act of a capable, thinking woman; it is a plot device to provide Luffy with the Navy backup he needs to challenge the Shichibukai, and to give a character whose emotional journey could be its own story arc a place within an adventure narrative. Should we not expect more of a trained ruler? An adult woman and a leader, especially one as successful as Hancock, is clearly capable of doing complex inner calculus that ought to imply that an uninterested male is not worth gambling the security of her country on. Strange, then, that she only fails to think when it’s convenient to upholding the plot– as well as upholding generalizations about the capability of women when they're under the sway of affection for men.

VI. Representation #2: Married Women and Working Mothers

What does a woman's capability look like in the Chinese view, and does love as a feminine pursuit alter the perceptions Chinese society draws of a female? We've already discussed the emergence of non-gendered success as a social notion in Communist China, and how it does battle with ingrained cultural notions of old; we saw what it does to the wage gap, and that women face unique pressures within the changing cultural and economic definition of their gender. What does a woman's capability look like in the Chinese view, and does love as a feminine pursuit alter the perceptions Chinese society

\textsuperscript{200}Eiichirō Oda, One Piece (vol. 61): Romance Dawn For A New World, trans. Lance Caselman (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2012), chapter 597.
\textsuperscript{201}Oda, One Piece, vol. 55, chapter 555.
draws about a female? To answer this, one must understand what love means in Chinese culture. Studies of premarital sex scripts among young Chinese nationals reveal a cultural schema which defines love as 1) an institution defined primarily by security and long-term benefits, and 2) a desire to care for another person, which marriage is held to be the most concrete embodiment of.\textsuperscript{202} Love outside of these bounds, as we've also discussed on the subject of rape law, is codified both socially and legally to be more of a risk: of shame, of encountering the wrong, low-class man who in an attempt to woo you forces himself on you. Avoiding that risk was essential to the calculations of how Chinese women in Ferrer et al's study acted on their own sexuality, and arguably links the capabilities of a woman in love to the choices she makes in pursuing marriage above temporary relations, in the Chinese social consciousness. As long as the object is marriage, then love is fine and good in modern Chinese culture.

When it comes to marriage and children, the socially-expected products of love, I would again posit that the meeting of capitalistic cultural changes with traditional mores have produced a benefit in the support of women—this time for the cause of those who wish to have both families and careers. First, the nationalized culture of gain under the open-market system and the One-Child Policy places responsibility for two pairs of retired parents onto a married set of only-children, and this pushes women into the workplace; and second, the establishment of extended families living together in a filial arrangement provides a support network for mothers returning to work. In the late eighties, Tamara Hareven found the commonplace arrangement to be that babies were tended to by grandparents, in lieu of siblings or nannies; indeed, each family member plays a role in a filial orchestra, wherein grandparents care for children before they come of school-age, parents are breadwinners to support the children and grandparents, and children study to one day support their own parents.\textsuperscript{203} This ideal arrangement of extended family and several generations living under one roof has great historical

\textsuperscript{202}Farrer et. al,“Reimbedding Sexual Meanings,” 265-270.
precedent, and continues to be pursued in the modern era. Government support for the practice of grandparents being primary caregivers while parents work has come in the form of “grandparent schools”, answering national concerns that unequipped grandparents will spoil children too much.\footnote{Yang, Kelly, “In China, It's the Grandparents Who 'Lean In',” The Atlantic, September 30, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/09/in-china-its-the-grandparents-who-lean-in/280097/.} The continuation of these familial responsibilities, even in an age of industrialization and globalization, provides stability not just for growing children, but for mothers who might once have been caught between dreams of work and obligations to the domestic realm (or who, in historical times, had no choice of the former). This strange confluence is, again, a product of two cultures meeting: capitalistic demands from the West, and gendered expectations from the East. While such a lifestyle may create its own unique emotional struggles for a woman, she is at the very least not limited in her choice of occupation— which, in an increasingly-capitalistic system, gives her one of many possible kinds of autonomy. She is capable, as far as Chinese society is concerned, of having a career and a family without being deserving shame, and in doing so fulfills expectations about her capability as an economic entity, a loyal child, and a national asset.

VII. Conclusions

Boa Hancock could have been a feminist heroine. She could have used her power with direction, shown a great mind borne of being groomed for the throne of Amazon Lily, and commanded an army which recalled the fear and awe of the Green Amazons on whom they are based. None of this occurs because she is made to be, foremost, a vehicle for the idea that love and femininity make a person (not just a woman) weak. This stereotypical flaw leads her to make bold political movements, such as divorcing herself from the ideology of the rest of the Shichibukai. Love and intelligence can be formidable strengths, but Hancock rules by her sexuality and looks instead. This choice of motivation on the author's part is tinged with an annoying reference to a woman’s beauty being the primary
determinant of her success or worth in the world— which we understand to be a discriminating factor appropriated by corrupt and sexist employers in China, but for the most part not as much of a limitation for Chinese women when education is added to the equation. The most disturbing implication of all this is that rather than through her own strength, Hancock has risen to Shichibukai- hood through manipulation of those around her. She literally does not need to be intelligent, apt at politics, or a good potential leader—she’s beautiful, so she’ll get whatever she wants!

If I ventured to speak for the Chinese women I know, it is my belief that they would find Boa Hancock a character for whom sympathy or finding relation would be difficult. Plied with bad writing, she is the antithesis of what we have discovered modern Chinese femininity to be: enduring, success-driven, intelligent, and capable. Comic relief at best, when placed under the microscope of feminism she morphs into a microcosm of stereotypes and antiquated ideas about womanhood—ideas which Chinese women disprove every day to be a gender-standard. So if Boa Hancock is not there to provide a relatable and respectable figurehead for female readers of One Piece, we must ask ourselves: who is she there to please?
SECTION III: THE NOW AND FUTURE
(COMMUNOCAPITALIST) KINGDOM

I. Conclusions on Character Studies

Sitting down to read even the minimum amount of One Piece that would provide me with a working knowledge of the characters and universe was a daunting task at first, due to the series’ size. In the end, however, I realized that its length and epic nature matched the breadth and variety present in China’s own history surprisingly well. From Ming dynasty stories of court intrigues to Mongol and Manchu conquests and cyclic government upheavals, Chinese history has the same zany, saga-like qualities that have made One Piece an international hit. Making comparisons between the two become much easier, in light of this—yes, even the negative ones.

Nami, Robin, and Boa Hancock are essential characters to the story in which they exist, in spite of the flaws written deeply in their characters or forced upon them by perceived trends in readership. All three bring misconceptions about women that have been around for centuries to a head, and the popularity of the series in turn shows that on some level, these depictions are not yet disturbing enough to readers that they have begun to affect majority opinion or sales—the only two holds readers really have on the content produced in One Piece. In that lack of discontent, we see a sad acceptance of old, trotted-out stereotypes about women, and perhaps a kernel of belief in them informing said acceptance. First, the ‘male gaze’ so often employed in the series remains a selling point with males the world over due to the entitlement patriarchy hands them—and patriarchy in turn remains an innate part of Chinese culture. In a country where daughters are still viewed, in places, as burdens or less desirable than sons on levels that have created the intense gap between genders we now see affecting marriage levels and
social order, objectification of women clearly remains a cultural facet. And yet in mainland China, two cultures appear to be struggling for dominance: the new, industrial-capitalist refocus on family life amid the trappings of modernity, and an old fixation on antiquated norms as keeping Chinese culture Chinese. With Westernization and capitalism have come new inequalities and abuses, but they are arguably better than bound feet and powerlessness—and more attractive to the generation raised in the age of smartphones and increasing luxury. Unfortunately, patriarchy rides on the shoulder of Manifest Destiny, meaning that even an era free of the idea that “girl children should starve first” will know institutionalized discrimination and sexual dominance which are not fading, but are merely becoming ‘hidden’ in socioeconomic structures and the culture of business. Even in moving away from the more garish forms of female enslavement, ideas about sexual entitlement still places men firmly above women in the general social order of China. This may be part of the reason why manga drawn for heterosexual, male eyes remains popular.

Furthermore, a large part of the story and thus the popularity of the series are the detailed backstories from which One Piece females draw their motivations, flaws, and strengths, which resonate with cultural depictions of women in both Chinese folklore and pop-culture tales; some of China’s most famous woman-warriors, for example, were risen consorts or prostitutes, female greatness is often defined by servitude or suffering (the tale of Mei Jiangnu, whose claim to fame was avenging her husband and then drowning herself to protect her honor, comes to mind), and one of China’s most popular female figures today faces considerable prejudice for her transsexual identity. The acceptance of One Piece’s storylines may then reflect a continued acceptance in Chinese culture that suffering is merely a mandatory part of female existence. Trauma, abuse, and servitude are not aspects of the natural human condition, and are not the domain of one gender alone. Yet there are events

207 Cai, “China's Five Most Famous Women”
Chinese men will not, by dint of culture or their physical features, have to suffer through– and both pop-culture and traditional stories of women who emerge against these odds feed, in a way, the belief that a woman facing hellish odds or having been beaten down by circumstance is the norm.

Enforcing this belief on the ground is the resurgence of economic contribution as the primary determinant of social worth, which threatens women who do not shoulder the burden of competitive exams, higher education, or 14-hour workdays with powerlessness on two levels: social and socioeconomic. This fixation on achievement, regardless of circumstances and once in lieu of Western concepts of individual workers' rights, and a cultural belief that suffering is merely a part of the female experience takes away focus from the uncomfortable concept that discrimination, societal abuse, and gendered sufferings are created by individuals, and takes away the impetus for many to come together to create social change for women– an ideal construct by which patriarchy and capitalism bolster the inequality required for its own continued existence in a society. Thankfully, the Chinese feminist movement promises a new renaissance of discussion which transcends gender lines.

The victimization and sexual objectification of Nami, the perversion of Robin’s ability to think and act as a rational adult woman, and the simplification of Boa Hancock into a heap of generalizations about the female gender all show that malicious beliefs in one corner of the world can quickly spread and become acceptable in another culture through global media flows. This makes oppressive gender constructs a faster-spreading epidemic than positive attitudes and increased feminist calls for corporate consideration of media messages may be able to counteract. The damage, in effect, has already been done by the time a series with this kind of sexist imagery and symbolism gains wide readership– because a culture willing to accept hackneyed depictions of females already existed in the first place.

But what of the characters as entities, and the spaces they occupy? Those are thankfully not always defined by males, so Virginia Woolf need not turn in her grave. When Boa Hancock defies the Shichibukai, when Nami pilots the ship through a dangerous storm, or when Robin cleans up in a fight,
the women of *One Piece* are shown to be able to hold their own— and in the evolving capitalist tide now sweeping China, women do have more chances for social mobility and maintaining self-sufficiency. As previously discussed, a woman’s contribution to the economy is seen as genderless. It’s only when you recognize that the payback they get for doing so is being bridled (alongside gains for a company that keeps a talented woman from the position wherein she might accomplish the most) by institutionalized ideas of female inferiority that a parallel emerges between China’s working women and the girls of *One Piece*. Nami’s character, by dint of the increased sexualization meant to make her more “feminine,” is not respected enough to be framed in plots that might raise her back to the status of a key team player (she plays at most a support role); likewise, discriminatory practices aim to keep women “feminine” by limiting their progress and maintaining a male monopoly on positions and power, technically writing the storyline to success around women rather than through them. Like Robin, excuses for the objectification of women as weaker vessels are fortified by a feedback loop in which “protecting”/limiting women is the defining duty of mankind, and women have to be protected because they are not men, and they are not men because they need protecting— and so it goes on, *ad infitum*, to the detriment of female (and thus national) opportunity. With Boa Hancock, we see that the gap created between real women and perceptions of them increases due to this mentality, until women are no longer perceived as being human at all, but instead a pile of preconceived notions that even self-seen reality cannot dissuade people of.

The world of work being not unlike the “battle economy” of *shonen* and work being the means of climbing up in a capitalist society means that in both universes, women can and do exist as their own entities— but outside forces are forever working on them to discredit, dehumanize, and dis-empower them, even if it means hacking at their own vitality. The final word? “As in literature, so in life.”
II. Conclusions on China's Future

China is a hungry country: remembering desperate years of famine, grandparents worked assiduously to reassemble their fortunes and their fragile nation, parents rose from the ashes of a burning system to pursue a new, capitalist one, and their children are now consuming the material benefits of Western-style development. China's rising middle-class is not only a powerful economic entity, but a political one: empowered by the age of technology, teens casually configuring VPNs in order to access Facebook and eating hamburgers are now armed with a knowledge of the outside world that the past two generations went without, and a feeling of entitlement when it comes to comparative and opportunistic analysis of multiple systems– a concept that could have gotten you shot during the Cultural Revolution. Naturally, China's government sweats at the thought of destabilization of centralized order, but does so through two means that I believe are not sustainable: media censorship and brutalization of “dissidents”– or at least those it considers dissidents challenging their reign.

A. Manga and Media As Influence

As this thesis has been spent discussing Japanese media in China, considering manga censorship as well as other forms of foreign media seems a fine way to approach China's contrarian policy when it comes to foreign influence. Current government intention appears to be taking the best parts of foreign ideas and systems to utilize for its own centrist aims, but discarding aspects which challenge collectivism and blanket Chinese morality, and naturally those practices which engender individual and political empowerment. The moral climate of China is notably different from Japan's, where both the actual series and their themes originate; ideas about premarital sex are changing slower in China than in Japan,\(^208\) in China sexuality is largely still understood within the confines of marriage,\(^209\) and right-wing backlash of late shows that a real nostalgia for the 'safe' days of

\(^{208}\)Ferrer et al, “Reimbedding Sexual Meanings: A Qualitative Comparison of the Premarital Sex Scripts of Chinese and Japanese Young Adults,” 276.

\(^{209}\)Ibid.
conservative cultural autonomy.\textsuperscript{210} Journalists with obvious nationalist agendas have gone so far, especially during periods of strife with Japan, as to accuse the popular children's manga series \textit{Doraemon} of being intentional Japanese cultural propaganda.\textsuperscript{211} Obviously China welcomes Western funds and some foreign concepts— but the state walks a delicate line in inviting individualistic culture in, and thus closes doors on ideas in a famously arbitrary fashion. State censorship of media in China is often criticized by Western powers, and looking at a list of banned search terms reveals definite political agendas in what the government tries to forbid people from viewing: blogging websites (full of dangerous opinions!), information about situations of human-rights violation (destabilizing national faith!), news about Chinese Ponzi schemes and anything about contemporary ethnic tensions in Xinjiang province. Even familiar sites like Youtube and Facebook are banned, despite similar sites being available in Chinese (which are presumably able to be better monitored).\textsuperscript{212} The object of these bans is, clearly, to limit available pools of information that could inform anti-government sentiments or Westernized schema-building. Sexuality is another commonly-censored aspect of media, as seen in the decision to take off air and then censor a massively popular drama series on the first Empress of China due to the cleavage shown by the period-appropriate costumes.\textsuperscript{213} Despite the state Association of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television's claims that there was 'simply no time' for another historical drama,\textsuperscript{214} heavy sanctions against the inclusion all manner of 'morally reprobate' activities in show and streaming media plots were enacted with suspicious swiftness in late 2013, around the time of the \textit{Empress}' removal. Adultery, innuendos, one-night stands, intense violence, and even the supernatural

are reportedly getting the ax on streaming sites and public television, and Chinese viewers have openly worried that “there will be nothing left to watch” under such guidelines.\textsuperscript{215} Part of the reason for attempted censorship all questionable practices may arises from the vagueness of China's obscenity code. According to a China Post article citing two foreign exchange students arrested for public sex, “The definition of “indecent public behavior” is not clear in the Criminal Code of the Republic of China. The article states that “According to the Article 234 under the Offense Against Morality statute, 'a person who for purposes of exhibition publicly commits an obscene act shall be sentenced to imprisonment for less then one year.' ” The phrase “obscene act” is obviously mentioned, but no further explanation is given as to its specifics- which means it all depends on the police and state's judgment to determine what an “obscene act” is.”\textsuperscript{216} It should be noted that 'obscenity' is specifically defined entirely within the terms of 'offenses against morality' in actual legal code, revealing the importance of morality to Chinese culture– or at least the culture Communism tries to put forth as pan-Chinese. Combined with heavy state control, this under-defined moral-policing power makes strange bedfellows of nostalgic, anti-globalization sentiments and a manufactured state culture that is still fairly prudish, in an attempt to retain control and cultural autonomy.

And there is evidence that manga is changing norms: in her thesis, Yang Wang offers a vital Chinese student's viewpoint on how manga provides new ideas to young-adult readers. In Wang's words, Chinese manga readers are hungry for viewpoints besides the stale ones provided by a “solemn and depressive” state education, which she believes is still inordinately focused on promoting the goals of Socialism.\textsuperscript{217} Especially in terms of sexuality, which Wang declares to be “generally ignored” in both social and official education, manga and the internet have apparently assisted in the making of

\textsuperscript{215}Ibid.
sexuality into a conversable subject rather than a shameful secret. But sex isn't the only inspiring theme in *manga*; Wang believes that the escapism provided by sensational stories is innately attractive to children growing up in a pressure-cooker school system and achievement-based society—a need which some believe Chinese animation fails to meet. A visitor to one of China's first *manga* conventions stated that their interest in manga was rooted in the fact that *manga* and *anime* were like nothing China had been able to produce: “If a Chinese animation isn’t educational, or if it raises any question marks on moral grounds, it won’t be given a pass by the authorities and there have been many cases where a television broadcast is impossible. This is why filmmakers tend to stick to safe themes, based on old classics. This hinders creativity and restricts everything to the traditional.” For a generation who grew up on the brief glut of sanctioned series that poured into China during the 1990's, like *Doraemon* and *Detective Conan*, early acquaintance with the medium may cause later conflict when they wish to watch series with more violence or sexual themes than the state would prefer—and yet patriotism remains high, with one viewer saying that “my hobbies are separate [from patriotic action]”. Compared to the all-encompassing nationalism characterized during the Cultural Revolution, this generation's view of politics is clearly more individualistic. And in lieu of formal publishing, which has declined substantially, the internet provides easy access to *manga*. China's modern *manga* readers are the definition of extralegal viewers: they download their *manga* and read/watch on pirated links, which are being created just as fast as the state can bring them down. TV Tokyo's move to offer free streaming on Tudou (China's Youtube) is a bold move, calculated to extend the cultural influence of Japanese media on a population that, distanced from Japanese imperial

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218 Ibid., 25
aggression by time, is willing to overlook historical grudges when good media and business deals are at stake.\textsuperscript{223} But for all its political implications, the love of \textit{manga} is merely a symptom of a greater syndrome: the acceptance and eagerness to consider foreign ideas and media, which is faintly inevitable in an era of globalization as a vehicle for development.

\textbf{B. Development As Influence}

The Chinese model for development has, in general, been good to inhabitants of 21\textsuperscript{st} century China. Even the poorest of the poor are better off than they were ten years ago; in 2011, only 6.3\% of the population lived below the Global Poverty Index of 1.25\$ earned per day.\textsuperscript{224} We've already discussed the implications of better wages and increased opportunities for Chinese women both high and low on the socioeconomic scale, as well as how cultural values are shifting to accommodate these new allowances: feminism is on the rise, and attention is being called to sexist practices, language, and policies. Even protest is seeing a careful resurgence, such as in a recent occupation of mens' toilets in Guangdong to promote gender equality through access to public facilities. The movement has, tellingly, met with success: not only did passing men “acknowledge” the campaign, but it was met with promises by local government to improve gendered restroom ratios.\textsuperscript{225} China's recent adoption of a sweeping, 20-year National Program on the Development of Women implies that more attention is being paid to gender inequality; among its goals, the program lists reducing female illiteracy, promoting maternity insurance and female-specific healthcare access, and even encouraging involvement in grassroots democratic movements.\textsuperscript{226} But hints of centrist agenda peek through even the outline of the program: in “Women And the Environment,” we are told that China will seek to “emphasize[s] gender equality and

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\textsuperscript{223}Ibid
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\textsuperscript{226}Fang, “Activists Launch Campaign to " Occupy" Men's Public Toilets”, 2014.
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harmonious family relations and improvements of capabilities to prevent and respond to disasters.”

Rural areas are more likely area to be struck by natural disasters, and are also the last bastions of traditional patriarchy. Will harmonious relations mean acquiescing to the area's specific cultural values, or combating them with an economic-centered argument that women can obtain worth through work? Both arguments are problematic, in that the first may occur due to the time constraint of the agenda: in the same way that grain production numbers were inflated during the Cultural Revolution so as not to lose face in front of the Dear Leader even while the countryside starved, could China merely claim it is improving cultural perceptions of women, and even market this as cultural human-rights awareness, while only marginally attempting to change minds or failing to address both male and female education in gender equality? This was their failure during the Cultural Revolution, and only time will tell if the state education system— which already shies away from talking about sex and troublesome bits of history— is up to the task of inclusive gender education. Equally problematic is the notion that China will continue its short-term policy of encouraging economics as the way for women to ‘win back’ their worth, especially in rural provinces where they continue to contribute as much as any man to food yields— the primary economy of subsistence farmers. The economics argument promotes better education as a vehicle to national and individual betterment, which the state is addressing through promises of increasing the number of kindergartens throughout rural areas— but it also promotes migration to urban centers, where the best, established schools are. For those beyond the help of education, who are too old or too poor, a surrender to sweatshops and mines are immediate measures for achieving the attractive prosperity of their urban neighbors. In short, this is state progress paid for in citizen misery.

And that's not all: women under such a policy would not only be offering themselves up to the

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maw of rampant capitalism, but trading long-term codification of their rights as *human and individual rights* for a shiny substitute: their rights being considered only in terms of general development for the nation-state, wherein they retain the same genderless, economic worth that they did during the *last* great revolution. Interested (as all states are) in retaining the systems of government which best serve its desires, China does not bear the torch of equality with spotless hands. It is a centrally-organized state with a single ruling party— one which is increasingly coming under scrutiny for rampant corruption. The mechanism for dispensing equality is arguably already malfunctioning, as we see in international *and* domestic critique of its fall to the universal draw of monetary acquisition.

**III. Dissidence, Corruption, and the Outgrowth of Grassroots**

In China, corruption has become a major target of the current Jinping administration. Transparency International gives the country a 36 out of 100 in Corruption Perception, meaning that these failures are obvious to international report-writing bodies; they also serve China a scathing 27/28 in the Bribe-Paying Index, meaning that bribes have become a critical part of dealing with local government in the Chinese experience.\(^{229}\) According to economists Mi and Liu, this kind of corruption is a result of measures attempting to answer the poor's outcry for redistribution of funds: progressive taxes and increased spending only produce more opportunities for entrenched corruption to dig down and become rooted, in a practice they call “rent seeking.” In addition, they cite a disconnect between local and state agendas that occurs as economic decentralization meets the tide of government centralization.\(^{230}\) The Jinping administration will certainly be remembered as one that took a hardline stance against corruption: their hallmark Eight Points Campaign has already brought about 77,000 investigations, and over 130,000 instances of “discipline” upon corrupt officials. What that discipline

\(^{229}\)"Corruption By Country: China", *Transparency International*, http://www.transparency.org/country#CHN.

actually entails, however, is largely a mystery.\textsuperscript{231}

But China has also fallen under international scrutiny for its treatment of “ideological corruption,” the vehicles of which are individual citizens who may be labeled dissidents for expressing opinions on governance practices, revealing stories of maltreatment, or even promoting certain agendas. Surveillance is another cloudy issue, but many dissidents speak of feeling followed or being attacked– some of whom are vocal feminists, who are increasingly being herded under the umbrella of government suspicion of all things change-oriented.\textsuperscript{232} Paranoia over “losing” its base to Western ideals is arguably the source of Chinese repression. Rather than any loyalty to the Communist model, I would posit (pessimistically, but in accordance with my belief in economic-incentive as a primary determinant of human behavior) that the retention of personal wealth and power is the primary motivation for protectionists and conservatives within Chinese government; transparency and democracy are dangerous to those whose income derives from cloistered crime and an unchallenged regime. This style of policy may see contradictory, in that the government seeks to employ Western business and economic models but actively seeks to prevent individuals from accessing Western media, social concepts, and opinions. It is contradictory, and China has become a house divided for it: social movers and shakers, young people aware of the outer world, and the unstoppable river of information unable to be halted by a faulty, anachronistic censorship system on one side, and the might of a centralized, self-protecting government on the other.

**IV. Who Wins?**

It is my belief that there is a showdown of *shonen manga* proportions waging in China right now, between a centralized state power whose traditions is non-democratic, and a new generation


steeped in a desire for more say in social policies like feminism. I hold this opinion based on analysis of two opposing forces: the state's vested political interest in maintaining both capitalist inflows and Communist centralization of power, and the inevitability of ideological contamination in a world where no state can operate in a vacuum. I think these two forces will remain at loggerheads for the foreseeable future, as each holds power over the other: the government holding its position that unity and the existing power structure must be maintained at the expense of individual rights, and the public's increasing insistence on seeing those rights respected. Corruption, centralization of power, and entrenchment ensure the continued power of the regime, and social movements which challenge the state's agenda will need strong backing and a creative incentive.

Does China's fledgling feminist movement have these tools yet? In my mind, they potentially have the first, and might enjoy a bit of a “free ride” on the national-development train for the second—though of course gendered rights are not assured upon ascent to Developed Nation status, and at that point Chinese feminists' already-difficult fight will become that much harder, as they will be squaring off against male-dominated, established institutions like the business world. The Chinese feminist movement has the potential to learn from the mistakes as well as the successes of Western feminism, and benefits from the widespread information-sharing technology of the current era; nationalism even plays for their side in some ways, as developing the nation requires general development of populations through education, which feminism in a state-mandated form could technically ride upon the wings of. Improving the status and cultural perceptions of women is definitely a part of the Chinese agenda— but the motivation to do so is largely coming from the same “economic equation” that has been repeated throughout Chinese history: we need women to work and to support the revolution (in this case a capitalistic development model), and the pittance of the freedom to work as hard as men and be taken advantage of like men is enough of an offering to garner much support. In the vastness of a country where its people sport varied levels of education and socioeconomic positions, we can be sure that
genuine advocates of innate female worth and feminist tendencies exist somewhere within China's hive of local and even state government— but we must also acknowledge that feminism is a new movement, and like any revolutionary concept will be subject to struggle before it gains strong footing.

At present, the struggle for feminists remains the same on every plane of the globe: how do you incentivize entrenched patriarchal systems to listen to your agenda? What has worked in the West (a long slog of advocacy, bolstered by social upheaval in the 1970's) cannot be pasted, slapdash, onto China; feminists there must confront the weight of history and a unique culture, as well as a more centralized power structure and different conception of rights. Using technology as a medium, I believe Chinese feminists will first attempt to gather the social support which necessitates gradual policy change. In effect, the notion of female equality will be more built up by tech-created awareness than by young female breadwinners “playing by the rules” and slowly climbing the economic ladder, where prejudices await them and keeping your head down remains the best way to keep your coveted job. The only problem is that this plan of attack will progress slowly— much slower than we would wish, when it comes to bestowing equality.

Furthermore, this model has many troublesome connotations for how women will perceive their own worth and come to define abuse. I fear that to get ahead in a culture which has begun to fixate on monetary success, Chinese women may “default” to believing that their gendered struggles are simply par for the course, based on their knowledge of anecdotes about female experience. The internet, a new privilege of their era, may interrupt this pattern of acquiescence by supplying information that's neglected by school curriculum and through absorption of family anecdotes. Censorship, which is being everyday challenged by VPN technology and the devil-may-care attitude that comes with a capitalist, gratification mindset, may be able to stand against foreign sentiment, but cannot fight those who disobey it from within. As a force, I believe information proliferation will be the strongest advantage Chinese feminists carry with them into battle. While general development goals bring
women into higher positions, information access will leave them wanting more— and by the time that
China achieves Developed Nation status, it may very well be that Chinese women are in a position to
bargain for more from their government. At present, very few seats in the Politburo and other Party
apparatuses are occupied by females, and deep biases still exist within hiring systems. Representation
is another important step in the uphill struggle to prominence, and a critical one in view of the
observation that percentages of women in government have fallen since the Mao era.

Countless smaller, unpredictable factors could also shift the balance for Chinese feminists;
there's really no predicting either positive or negative social trends until they've already begun creating
an effect. For example, just as marriage once stood to compromise the power of Chinese women
historically, the practice (or how the practice has been affected by centuries of son-bias) may, ironically,
 affect this situation: as dowry prices for a relatively scant number of brides go up, it is more likely
that “expensive” girls will continue working and pursuing education until a sufficiently-rich prospect
comes along, to the general empowerment of their gender.

Predicting the future is always a dangerous game— but I would hazard that feminists empowered
by a revolutionary age of communication and technology are much better off than those who had to
write letters and post under pseudonyms. China is, without a doubt, a changing landscape both
physically and culturally. And the women who are a part of that landscape are well-armed, by both
history and the blessing of this age, for a ride into the sky they have been holding up half of for so long.

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